Weighing in on Archive Orphans

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Abstract

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This essay arises out of an experimental research project undertaken within the costume archives of *The Cholmondeley*s and *The Featherstonehaughs* – companies which were fixtures of the UK contemporary dance landscape from their inception in the mid-1980s until a sudden cessation of performances in 2011. The research in question was unashamedly hands-on in nature, foregrounded by a closely collaborative relationship between an artist (choreographer Lea Anderson) and a scholar (writer and curator Mary Kate Connolly). This work confronts the 'problem' of performance remains – their material bulk and heft and, conversely, their mercurial and sometimes seemingly weightless nature. Their refusal to be pinned down as discreet objects whilst at the same time taking up significant physical space. Guardians of tacit knowledge and forgotten histories, vessels of the phantasmagorical but also – to look at it another way – aged trash.

Rather than summarising the work undertaken as already described in the recently published monograph, *In Smithereens: The Costume Remains of Lea Anderson's Stage* (Connolly 2024), this essay is an informal reflection on a lengthy research journey centred on tactics of Disintegration, Preservation, Transaction, and Display. It approaches this reflection via a lens of 'weight'. The physical burden of a costume bundled into a stacked packing box in a freezing lock-up. The oscillating scale measurements of capricious, incalculable words like legacy, history, preservation. The load of a hardback book held in the hand or perched on a university library shelf or floating in a data storage cloud – nominally measured in grams of weight or gigabytes of digital space. This essay compiles a list of weights; akin to totting up the balance in a ledger or itemising a research inventory, as a means of thinking more broadly, or intuitively, on what might be at stake in this kind of experimental small-scale archival research – relationally, logistically, and creatively. The writing emanates directly from the perspective of the researcher. The list of weights tallied are archival orphans, cast out from the sanctioned narrative of the project – covert inhabitants of notebook jottings, exasperated SMS exchanges and expletive-laden zoom calls in the midst of a pandemic-stalled project. As the pervasive exclusivity of museological and cultural institutions persists – driving an increasing number of small-scale artistic companies to seek their own archival 'solutions' – the essay celebrates what could be termed *guerillarchive* tactics. Experimental modes of archiving by the means at hand – logistically, financially, materially, and culturally.

It circles around the tensions between the artist and the scholar in collaboration, between the tangible and intangible, between the recuperable and the lost. It advocates for making and taking up space and weight, physically, virtually, and imaginatively, in our approach to performance remains.

A moulded theatrical face mask of thin plastic, adorned with mismatched, collaged facial features: Feather-light. It teeters on an outstretched palm, exerting a barely perceptible strain on the muscles of the forearm.

A full bodysuit of power-net rendered in dreary lilac: Weightier than you might expect, for all its apparent delicateness. Slithery, bordered by seams that snag – it's hard to keep a hold of.

A hardback, peer-reviewed monograph with full colour images and an unfeasibly high retail price: Technically, 963 grams. In the hand – my hand, anyway – it feels heavier.

A catalogue of seminal performance work by a British female choreographer gradually becoming elided, fading from view: Burden incalculable. It fluctuates as time goes on and the socio-cultural framing structures alter, as they have always done. This shedding and gaining of cultural kilos over time is not unique to any one body of artistic work.

My contribution to this collection arises due to having written a book on an experimental research project which I undertook within the costume archives of *The Cholmondeleys* and *The Featherstonehaughs* – companies which were fixtures of the UK contemporary dance landscape from their inception in the mid-1980s until a sudden cessation of performances in 2011, as a result of a total cut in their government (UK Arts Council) funding support. The shows stopped. The entire costume archive (alongside of course, ephemera, playbills, desiccated make--up tubes, reel to reel recordings, VHS tapes, lengths of cabling…) remained. These performance remains are entangled with a specific milieu of British artists working in the late twentieth century, influenced by punk and DIY culture. The works of *The Cholmondeleys* and *The Featherstonehaughs* were distinct from much of the UK contemporary dance scene at that time, due in part to their use of costume and design. Costume was a key element, employed to influence and disrupt the choreography, as opposed to serving as an unobtrusive, decorative addition. My work with this archive is foregrounded by a closely collaborative relationship with the choreographer and director of these companies, Lea Anderson. By dint of my research being unashamedly hands-on in nature, it is also inherently relational. None of the experimental work which I carried out with the costumes would have been possible without Anderson's consent and, indeed, enthusiasm for tackling the 'problem' of performance remains – their material bulk and heft and, conversely, their mercurial and someti-

mes seemingly weightless nature. Their refusal to be pinned down as discreet objects whilst at the same time taking up significant physical space. Guardians of tacit knowledge and forgotten histories, vessels of the phantasmagoric but also – to look at it another way – aged trash.

This continues today – both the work and the problem. Ten years on and two books, several exhibitions, a couple of short films, a large catalogue of new photographs, a social media dissemination campaign, and we have found no single answer to the question(s) of the costume archive. That is not to say that the work has not been worthwhile. If anything, it has suggested to me that the 'solutions' to this problem are multiple and endlessly potentiate. Forever in a process of arrival and becoming. Indeed, it is this very multiplicity which can bear the most interesting fruit when (as an increasing number of small-scale artists and companies are doing)[1] it becomes time to consider how a performance archive can best 'live on' outside of traditional structures of museological preservation and heritage. How, for example, a performance company which may have been avowedly marginal, fugitive, residing outside of the mainstream, might broach the notion of 'legacy' via their archival remnants. And, further, how that company might satisfactorily negotiate the competing agendas of museological preservation and conservation for an imaginal future, the desire for reparative historiographic representation, and the often unsustainable logistical and economic considerations required to physically house and maintain a largescale material archive. Even for the most radically fringe or impoverished performance companies, the 'stuff' mounts up. In basements, costume lockups and, sometimes, museum holdings. All this, before one even begins to tackle – as is the case with *The Cholmondeleys* and *The Featherstonehaughs* – the need for an artist/company to make new work and continually evolve, and the inevitable question of whether the archive has an active role to play in that evolution and, if so, just what that role might be.

In the example of the research which forms the backbone of my book *In Smithereens: The Costume Remains of Lea Anderson's Stage*, the path I took was one rooted in material encounter with costumes, forged through hands-on practical interactions with them, and guided by thematics of Disintegration, Preservation, Transaction, and Display. It moved in-step with the diverse archive at hand – residing outside of a museum with little or no economic support, managed by a choreographer still very much engaged in making new works and attempting to sustain a company at a time of increasing precarity in the UK arts sector. I was lucky enough to be able to draw

1 For example, see UK based Siobhan Davies Dance and their initiative Artist Archive annual programme: https://www.siobhandavies.com/artist-archive/23-24/. Accessed 09 July 2025.

on the expertise of a range of highly skilled professionals in conservation, curation, costume making, and design, along the way. My work with the costume archives of *The Cholmondeleys* and *The Featherstonehaughs* by no means suggests 'best practice strategies' for the after-lives of costumes or an overarching philosophical stance on performance remains. It is more an invitation to envision the choreographic archive as a repository of the awkward, scattered remains of legacy, blown apart into fragments. That is to say, smithereens which, despite their partial nature, can nonetheless be activated to disrupt the disappearance inflicted on performance costumes and the companies who danced in them. I will not, in this essay, attempt to produce a condensed version of my monograph. It is out there in the world already. Downloadable onto computer screens as an e-book. Stored in protective boxes in the distribution warehouse of its publisher, awaiting transportation. Taking up physical and virtual space, whether visible or hidden from view.

I would like instead to talk about weight. The physical burden of a costume bundled into a stacked packing box in a freezing lock-up. The oscillating scale measurements of capricious, incalculable words like legacy, history, preservation. The load of a hardback book held in the hand or perched on a university library shelf or floating in a data storage cloud – nominally measured in grams of weight or gigabytes of digital space. The 'method' by which I will approach this discussion of weights will be to compile a list; akin to totting up the balance in a ledger or itemizing a research inventory, as if that were a possible thing in this context. I have chosen this approach for two reasons. Firstly, I hope that speaking of weights might operate as a conduit to thinking more broadly, or intuitively, on what might be at stake in this kind of archival research – relationally, logistically, and creatively. The kind of stakes, for example, involved in presenting your research on attempting to 'disintegrate' a costume, at a symposium on 'The Politics of Conserving and Display' (Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, 2016), and receiving a horrified response from a museum professional who could not countenance undertaking such a destructive act with a historical artefact. The realization, in encounters like these, that my research (and this isn't unique) which habitually occupies the interstices between worlds of practice or lexicons of knowledge, is often working in opposition to the assumedly dominant side of the coin. Disintegration of costumes as opposed to museological preservation and heritage. Preservation of financially worthless objects in the face of unavoidable material decay.

Secondly, my decision to weigh up things is a means of coercing myself into writing directly from the perspective of the researcher, rather than undertaking the habitual sublimation of a research process into a wider polished discourse for publication.

Here, I speak directly from my vantage point – standing in the costume lockup with odd, mercurial garments freed from their boxes and tumbling through my fingers, unsure of what question to ask next. I do not speak from the outlook of the artist who stands next to me in that selfsame storage unit, knee deep in the relics of her own conjuring, nor that of the dancer whose body originally inhabited the fabric shell which I clasp. Or indeed the theatre critic or dance academic whose words, written decades ago, remain (if searched for) every bit as stubbornly as the sequined lycra does – more visible now than the costumes themselves. These perspectives, along with accompanying dialogic partners in philosophy, dance and art history, sociology, and material culture can be found in *In Smithereens*. The list of weights which I tally up here are orphans, cast out from the sanctioned narrative of a lengthy research journey – the covert inhabitants of notebook jottings, exasperated SMS exchanges and expletive-laden zoom calls in the midst of a pandemic-stalled project. As the pervasive exclusivity of museological and cultural institutions persists – therefore driving an increasing number of small-scale artistic companies to seek their own archival 'solutions' – perhaps a window onto a project grounded in what I like to call *guerillarchive* tactics could be of some use, placed as it is, in the wider frame of this publication.

1. Dead butterflies and can they fly?

Comparative measure: A single butterfly (somewhere between 0.04 grams and 2 grams)

In the Spring of 2016, I sit with Lea Anderson in the café of London's Victoria and Albert Museum. She is taking a break in between rehearsals for *Hand in Glove*, a performed costume exhibition which she is staging in the Raphael Court gallery of the museum. It features over 300 of her costumes and accessories with dancers performing vignettes from several of her key works.[2] We're chatting about the 'problem' of the archive. What to do, essentially, with performance remains. 'Sometimes', Lea tells me, 'I think I will burn them all and that will be a work, or perhaps auction off a few at Sotheby's to fund a new work, or maybe I should give some of them to somewhere like the V&A [Museum] after all...' (Connolly, 2024a, 5) The museum had in fact approached her previously regarding this topic – exploring the idea of acquiring an

2 See: Connolly, M. K. (2017), 'Hand in Glove: Reflections on a performed costume exhibition and the stories behind the garments', *Studies in Costume & Performance*, 2:1, pp. 9–25.

archive costume for the institution's 'Theatre and Performance' holdings. Initially excited by the idea, Lea tells me she soon began to get cold feet. 'That was when I started to think about dead butterflies', she continues 'and whether we need to have them pinned in glass cases in museums... I understand it's important to know that a butterfly once existed. But it's not a butterfly anymore...' (Connolly, 2024a, 239).

This is the conversation which sets things spinning. I become increasingly preoccupied with imagining what it might be to pursue an archival experiment based on these themes; these potential alternative 'after-lives' that a costume could have, beyond their current existence in a plastic box secreted in an anonymous lockup. Costume remains begin to take on the mantle of hibernating creatures in my mind's eye, or unsettled ghosts. When I start to look for them, these 'dead butterflies' of Lea's seem suddenly to crop up everywhere. I discover them, for instance, as I paw through costumes at a yard sale which the English National Opera holds in a vast, hangar-like space, selling their 'dead stock' at knock off prices. This, too, a result of needing to rehouse the opera company in response to shifting policies in government funding.[3] Amid the frenzy of the bargain hunters, I witness a man parading himself before a mirror propped against a pillar, in the middle of the concrete floor. He wears a straitjacket costume and, peering intently at his reflection, carefully assesses whether it can make a successful transition to being worn as a civilian fashion item. Not a dead butterfly after all, but one merely returned to the cocoon for its forthcoming incarnation.

A few years after our conversation in the museum café, it is announced that the 'Theatre and Performance' holdings at the V&A are to be reduced due to space constraints.[4] Lea tells me she is relieved that she never donated a costume to them after all. As my research with the costumes gains ground and we begin to chart out new after-lives for several of the garments, I attempt to always hold in mind the sense that once, these butterflies flew...

Teresa Barker (Former *Cholmondeleys* company member):

> **The dancers' work had to become something above and beyond the choreography and the dance itself. A particular mindset was needed to hold with ease, what essentially became mini-emergency ordeals each night backstage; the emergencies of manic costume**

3 See: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/nov/09/english-national-operas-funding-to-be-cut-to-zero-unless-it-moves-from-london. Accessed 09 July 2025.
4 See: https://www.str.org.uk/about/history/2021-the-str-and-the-restructuring-of-the-va/. Accessed 09 July 2025.

> changes. On top of this there was the task of coming to know how to wear, with grace, beyond all restriction, the different kinds of impingement upon one's movement scope and possibility: the high heels, the waistline-strapped 2lb battery pack, the wetsuit and flippers, the studded biker's jacket, the breathlessly tight corsets etc. etc. Far-out costumes and faster-than-the-speed-of-light costume changes became features of *Cholmondeleys* and *Featherstonehaughs* life. (Connolly, 2024b: 221)

2. The weight of snow. And a bridal dress as comeuppance

Comparative measure: fifty snowflakes (1 gram)

It is on the walk between the conference centre and the conservation studios of the Victoria and Albert Museum that things go awry. I am attending a study day as part of my doctoral research – a day which allows a visit to the hallowed work rooms of the conservators in the V&A, who are currently working on a collection of Balenciaga hats and dresses for an upcoming retrospective exhibition. It is midwinter and it snows. By the time I am standing on the polished floor of the museum, cheeks flushed from the change in temperature, my coat is running with muddy droplets defiantly making their undignified route to the previously unsullied floorboards. It is an environment of the highest prestige, and it is equivalently pristine. I – at this point, still largely uneducated in the intricacies and politics of material conservation – observe the meticulous skill and care which the conservators bring to their work. They are, in the case of the Balenciaga garments, at pains to make their repairs invisible. The goal with this exhibition, as with many fashion displays, is to showcase the garment in its best and seemingly unadulterated state. As I step gingerly through these work rooms, I am already plotting an intervention centred on the potential disintegration of a costume and a deliberate highlighting of the garment's weakest links. Its snags, hasty backstage repairs, its theatrical grime and human traces of sweat. I am plotting this in between patting ineffectually at the snow droplets on my coat when I think no one is looking. No longer snow now, but water. Like a bodysuit which will soon – as a result of my research – morph into a hard drive, these droplets seem to weigh more than they did in their original form.

I am fortunate enough to be allowed a further visit to the costume and dress holdings

of the V&A and their expert guardians, at a later stage of my research. This time, it comprises a dedicated tour with a curator and a conservator who brief us on the rigours of temperature-controlled museum storage, pest control strategies, flood and fire protection, and the difficulties of accessing certain material culture and dress collections – many of which (particularly couture collections) are confined to the private archives of fashion houses. As a visitor I have, as requested, stowed all my belongings in a locker before entry. I am permitted a single pencil and a notebook. I am already overawed. At one point, the generous curator allows me to pull open any drawer I would like to choose – I pick one at random and it gifts me with a couture gown which belonged to ballerina Margot Fonteyn, slumbering beatifically in its paper-lined bed. By the time of this second visit to the V&A, I have already set the date for a disintegration intervention in the *Cholmondeleys* archive when I will gather with the research team (myself, a photographer, videographer, choreographer Lea Anderson, wardrobe mistress Jay Cloth and performer Makiko Aoyama), to attempt the destruction of a costume. I am feeling confident and at home with this plan. It seems in sympathy with the creative and logistical motors of the archive at hand. Setting these considerations against the impressive edifice of the V&A workrooms, archive holdings and overall expert machinery, however, gets me thinking about time. The time-travelling nature of objects which remain after their surrounding performative context and liveness have long been lost to the ether. As our curatorial tour continues, I meet with the Icelandic bridal dress that serves as rightful comeuppance for the short-term thinking that is fueling my destructive bent with the disintegration intervention. Laid out carefully on a display table, a full, navy skirt gives way to vivid embroidered flowers along its hem. The bodice is made from a contrasting green fabric with delicate metal fastenings. It is accompanied by a pale white collar with decorative needlework which can be attached separately to the ensemble. The curator explains that the standard museum protocol for certain historical objects of particular age or fragility dictates that, if exhibited, the item will automatically return to storage for 10 years, before possibly being authorised for exhibition again. The dress laid out before me survived both fire and shipwreck in the 1800s, only to resurface and be donated to the V&A in the early 1900s by the grandson of the explorer who had sought to bring it to England in the first place. Even to my untrained eyes, it is legible as a garment – I can imagine how it was made, how it might be worn and how it might have looked when worn. This bridal dress is a dress which asks a question of me. Do I or Lea Anderson as the keeper of her archive need to be thinking two to three hundred years ahead? What, in the case of a 40-year-old costume archive, constitutes playing a long game?

3. A bodysuit that is a hard drive

Comparative measure: external hard drive (775 grams)

What might it look like to allow a costume to die? To disintegrate, to become something other, to shape-shift. Take on a new form or potentially vanish in the attempt. A series of complex considerations led me and Lea Anderson towards the seemingly inevitable conclusion that it would be right to at least allow a costume to walk the path of potential disintegration, if only to discover what new forms might take shape. Suffice to say, the selection of a garment for sacrifice is not taken lightly. On the other hand, it is with relative ease that a lilac bodysuit from her 2006 work *Yippeee!!!* (nicknamed a 'Dead Skin') – aged, make-up stained, enmeshed with tendrils of wig hair – is deemed to be the perfect garment for an intervention which attempts to hasten the inevitable decay wrought on all animate and inanimate objects.

As historian of conservation and heritage, the late David Lowenthal, put it, 'nothing can be preserved forever. Every inanimate object, like every living being, undergoes continual alteration, ultimately perishing. Cumulative corrosion extinguishes every form and feature. Things either morph into other entities, dismember into fragments or dissolve into unrecognizable components' (Lowenthal, 2019: 16). This eventual morphing into something else, or the final obliteration of the Dead Skin bodysuit may well not be possible to observe in my lifetime, or Anderson's. But, if it's coming, as we know it is, then intervening in an act of creative destruction might serve as a means of, if not honouring, then at least *highlighting* the material transitions happening unseen in the costume archive, even as I type these words. And so, we create a frame for disintegration: a dancer dances in her original costume. She dances particularly taxing sections of the original choreography, repeatedly. Again, and again and again. Her dancing is filmed and photographed. The garment is inspected and documented after each bout in this potentially materially destructive ring. It doesn't give in. The Dead Skin becomes ever more streaked with make-up, snagged with hairs, strained and stretched at the borders of its seams. But it does not die. It does not disintegrate, although it does shape-shift. It becomes a film. A cluster of moving images captured by a video camera and stored on a hard drive, which I then splice and chop and lay out in sequence. A sequence which attempts to tell a story; to enact an embodiment, even, of a costume which refused to die. A costume which, materially, continues to change even if in ways so imperceptible as to be invisible to the naked eye. It is in the banking of the film footage that I realise the failure – from a sustainability point of view – of this endeavour. The costume is captured, yes. But the transformation to a different medium which it has taken also involves a material form – it has an expiry



Figura 01
Dancer Maho Ihara in Lea Anderson's work *Vippeee!!!* (2006).
Photographer: Pau Ros.

date. One that may in fact arrive sooner than that of the Dead Skin fabric itself. The hard drive's operating system will at some point become incompatible with contemporary technology. The plastic casement may crack or eventually leach toxins. The film footage will degrade, unless endlessly upgraded onto new platforms; time-travelling via machinery in the nick of time before it becomes obsolete, onwards into the future. The bodysuit is now a hard drive. Or to be precise, a set of data encapsulated in a hard drive; a moving image that may well fail to communicate with the viewing and streaming apparatuses yet to be invented.

4. Unique Selling Point

Comparative weight: 30 pieces of silver (approximately 420 grams)

'This three-piece painted suit is', I explain to the auction house's valuation expert, 'a vital artefact which represents a significant moment in British cultural history – the collaborative product of a key milieu of UK creatives... It is beautiful! Mercurial! Fashion but also theatre, clothing but also art, wearable but fit for exhibition...'. Despite my dedication to *guerillarchive-ing* tactics and the impetus for my research to discover alternative archival solutions for these unruly material relics, here I am cosplaying a dance historian, attempting to make a costume 'fit' the criteria to be auctioned at a prestigious auction house, to generate funds to sustain *The Cholmondeleys* company. I emphasize the starry credentials of costume designer Sandy Powell, I brandish the measured frameworks of scholarship which foreground my enquiry, I discuss the aesthetic merits of the garment.

By this point, I have carried out detailed research on this painted suit from Lea Anderson's work *The Featherstonehaughs Draw on the Sketchbooks of Egon Schiele* (1998 & 2010). I have had it photographed and painstakingly traced its provenance. I have visited the tailor's shop in London's Soho where it was made, I have interviewed designer Sandy Powell and listened to dancers' performance anecdotes – how it felt to move in it, how the colours of each suit interacted with one another, how the influence of Egon Schiele's sketches permeated choreography and design alike.[5] But it is now, as I progress determinedly through my 'sales pitch' to Sotheby's auction house in London, that I question whether I am in fact attempting a sellout.

5 Egon Schiele (1890–1918) was a renowned Viennese Expressionist Painter and protégé of Gustav Klimt. For this work, Anderson utilised his sketches as a basis for a choreographic score.

I find myself employing, not the language of academia in its measured and quantifiable statements, but rather, the terms of promotion and sale. As I begin to view the suit through the eyes of the auction house representative I am speaking to, I find it becoming ever lighter; equivalent to the seemingly paltry amount of money it might hope to be exchanged for. The horrid phrase 'Unique Selling Point' begins to haunt me, stalling my words.

The extremely helpful valuations experts with whom I consult later during my research will go on to school me in the vagaries of the economics underpinning theatre and performance remains. They will instruct me in how to research market comparables – sale prices of similar items auctioned before. They will also warn me of the relatively low monetary worth of most theatre costumes, and the disparity between the sale of film costumes and memorabilia and those of their theatrical counterparts. In the case of a contemporary dance company outside of the mainstream, with no star of stage or screen having deposited their corporeal residues inside the garments? Merely 'regular' dancers' sweat and makeup having left their indelible traces? This would be a matter of considerable concern for a valuator weighing up the case for auctioning a garment or garments within a high-value auction house.

Lea Anderson and I also conduct some weighing up of considerations – the cost of losing a costume and therefore rendering the archival holding from that work as incomplete, versus the monetary gain which might be accrued in auctioning a costume or set of costumes to generate income for sustaining the creation of new works for her companies. The weighing pan on the side of the scales where one might deposit any betrayal silver seems painfully light when the suit is placed, metaphorically, on the opposite pan. The scales simply don't balance.

5. Flat champagne

Comparative measure: a champagne flute filled to the brim (175 grams)

I am sitting in front of my computer screen. The 7th of May 2020 has dawned on a London still in the grip of heavy lockdown due to the COVID 19 pandemic. This was to have been the day of the opening of my exhibition *In Smithereens: A Collection of Fragments Considered as a Whole* – a culmination of my archival research involving the curation and display of a selection of costume artefacts. The screening of a film of a bodysuit which now lives on a hard drive, for example. The exhibiting of a painted

three-piece suit. A sunny day has given way to a balmy evening which would be just perfect for chatting, drink in hand, outside and inside of a little gallery as dancers intermingle with the crowd. Jostling for space to look up close at intimate exhibits of costumes and photographs. Putting communal headphones over your ears to watch a short film on a vintage television set. Instead, at my computer screen, I type out an email to Lea Anderson and gallerist Keran James, of the exhibition venue, studio 1.1, London. I write that, as I raise my champagne glass alone in my flat, I am simultaneously reiterating a promise that we will toast the exhibition opening one day soon. Already in that locked-down May of 2020, the exhibition that will in fact go on to happen in October 2021 is being imagined and planned for, with all the attendant leaps of faith which such planning requires. Meanwhile, the costumes kill time in their archival vault, stowed away in plastic and paper.

As public gatherings are banned within the UK under 2020 lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus, all forms of live performing arts become unfeasible 'in person'.[6] This is by now a well-known story. Insisting (during this time) on the need for an after-life for old costumes feels, in some respects, highly prescient in a world unexpectedly devoid of live theatrical work, gallery exhibitions and accessible museums. Equally however, the garments' ephemeral side is highlighted – they appear once again to be unable to generate significant weight. I fail to secure emergency funding for a virtual exhibition. The costumes, boxed away as they are, float in the ethereal, liminal space of postponement.

Thus, the archival research becomes severed from a temporal logic of project plans and time sensitive logistics. Whilst the ruptures to the research are frustrating, it feels nonetheless apt to be forced to scramble and re-organise. In some ways, the radical re-ordering merely echoes the realities of the costumes, and of the creative individuals linked with them. The freelance dancers, conservation experts, composers and props makers whose own livelihoods (like so many others) are imperiled by the ongoing pandemic. If the global destabilization of 2020 asked vital questions on an existential level, it also – focusing down to a far smaller sphere of influence – posed knotty questions as to how we might best care for objects which work *across* time and are, by their material and socio-cultural construction, subject to external forces both temporal and physical, in addition to economic. These forces could alter-

6 The United Kingdom went into official lockdown in mid-March 2020 following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In full nationwide lockdown, all schools and non-essential retail, performance and hospitality venues were closed to the public. See: Elgot, J. and Walker, P. (2021), 'England to enter toughest Covid lockdown since March', The Guardian, 4 January, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/04/england-to-enter-toughest-covid lockdown-since-march.
Accessed 09 July 2025.

natively be conceived in terms of the weight and pressure which they exert and, if measured thus, cannot be deemed as insignificant.

6. Severed Elastics

Comparative measure: 5 inches of elastic (2 grams)

The distance from the exhibition mount at eye level on the gallery wall to the concrete floor beneath is not more than five feet. The time it takes for the moulded plastic costume mask to slip between my clumsy fingers (as I attempt to hang it on the mount) and tumble, to a mercifully soft landing on the protective floor cushioning I have laid below, must be less than a second. But, as I watch this odyssey, mouth already opening to form the shape of a horror-induced expletive, I witness a journey that seems to be much greater in distance and to have taken far longer. The masks have travelled a long way. It will be severing their elastics which seals their arrival point.

It is a hand painted mask which has fallen. Queasy green, with exaggerated dark stained lips and violent splatters of red denoting rouged cheeks. This is one mask from a collection which contains several sets – plain white, hand painted in lurid colours, and ones with exaggerated collaged facial features. The masks were moulded to the faces of each individual dancer in the original cast of Lea Anderson's work *Smithereens* (1999). In the time since the production was staged, they have been used and re-used in exhibitions and student remounts of excerpts of her work. The passage of those intervening years and their attendant wear and tear registers in minor degradations to the masks – the painted surfaces are chipped in places, here and there the collaged features run white across the creases where the paper was folded and glued to the mask. They also acquired interlopers at some point – packing noodles and makeup sponges glued in to allow the masks to fit the faces of dancers not from the original cast. From my earliest involvement with this archive, it was clear that these masks were viewed by Lea Anderson as being quasi-totemic. Relics, in a way; captivating objects held in the hand, additionally imprinted – quite literally – by the cast of *The Cholmondeleys* and *The Featherstonehaughs*. In addition to the facial features themselves, the insides of the masks are streaked with stains left by the heavily painted faces of the performers, sweating while they danced. These objects are also illustrative of the conditions of making theatrical work in a time which predates technologies like 3D printing (the masks were moulded by hand using alginate,[7]

7 A quick setting mould material.

and vacuum-forged), or internet-based sourcing of imagery (the collaged facial features were clipped by hand from newspaper supplements using scissors), and they demonstrate a high level of maker craft, including hand stitched leather patches securing the elastics which affix the mask to the performer's face.

By the time this green mask escapes my inept fingers and commences its descent, I have already taken some considerable steps towards stabilizing them as objects and enhancing their longevity with bespoke protective storage. In consultation with conservation and costume experts, I have had archival boxes made to measure in sustainable, stable materials, inserted silk cushioning, and undertaken very basic cleaning. The sticky-taped stowaways of packing noodles and makeup sponges have been carefully removed on the basis that they were already beginning to degrade, producing abrasive grit which threatened to damage the delicate surfaces of the masks.

But the elastics too are beginning to break down. They feel slightly 'crunchy' to the touch and are undoubtedly exerting a minor strain on the front of the masks. It is at this point, looking down at the fallen but miraculously undamaged mask, that I phone Lea to ask whether I should take a final step and snip off the elastics. It would make them undeniably easier to mount as an exhibition object and render them more stable as a material archival object. On the other hand, taking this step would mean they could no longer be worn as a costume. I am reminded of the description both curators and material culture historians alike have outlined to me, of the transition an object makes from being an object of use or function, to an artefact for interpretation. This evolution typically comes as an object crosses the threshold of a museum, never to be worn or used again. Despite the fact we are situated wholly outside a museum, here in this tiny gallery where I am hanging the masks by hand, it seems we have nonetheless produced a 'container' for the masks which echoes that of a museum. Now nestled six to a box, cocooned in protective acid-free paper, the masks are extremely light to carry – lift a box and it feels as if it might be stuffed with cotton wool or candyfloss. Undoubtedly however, the boxes and tissue and silk have increased the weight of these objects immeasurably. Despite these measures, the peril never leaves. I would prefer not to carry the burden of responsibility. 'Snip them', instructs Lea. 'It will keep them safe.'



Figura 02
Painted masks from Lea Anderson's work *Smithereens* (1999).
Photographer: Rik Pennington.

Figura 03
Dancers Ronny Ming-Hei Wong, Neil Callaghan, Inn Pang Ooi and Ryen Perkins-Gangnes in *The Featherstonehaughs Draw on the Sketchbooks of Egon Schiele* (2010).
Photographer: Pau Ros.



7. Shattering, shattering

Comparative measure: a fistful of glass smithereens (50 grams)

The camera angle jumps abruptly forward, staggering it seems, down a white brick-lined industrial looking hallway towards an open door at the end. As the camera reaches this doorway, we catch a glimpse of transparent packing boxes filled with fabrics of all colours stacked to ceiling height, and a table with recording equipment perched on top. The next shot we encounter is angled downwards towards the table. A cassette tape is banged down on the tabletop, registering with a hard plastic echo. '*Flesh and Blood* cassette by *The Pointy Birds*!' comes the voice of Lea Anderson, from out of shot. 'You had forgotten this even existed!' 'I had!' replies her collaborator, the composer Steve Blake, also unseen in the camera frame. This is the opening scene of what Lea and I have termed an 'Archival Droplet' – small filmic capsules which deploy items as minute snapshots of the archive itself and, more importantly, the associative memories and undocumented histories which these objects provoke.[8] This droplet riffs on a 1989 work, *Flesh and Blood*. 'I wonder', muses Steve, 'whether anyone watching this has a copy' (*The Cholmondeleys* sold a number of these soundtrack cassettes). 'I wonder', Lea counters, 'whether anyone watching even has a cassette player.' Steve Blake and Lea Anderson discuss and reminisce about the works which relate to each object, in a manner akin to conjuring folk tales, and this provides a commentary to a fast-flickering array of performance footage, touring snaps, and thematic imagery (a newspaper front page from the 1980s for example, or a picture of a bus ticket dating from the same era).

When we alighted on the idea of Archival Droplets, hoping they could be replicated across social media platforms, be easily disseminated and exciting to watch, it was also (as with snipping the elastics) undeniably to do with keeping things 'safe'. Long submerged into not one, but two book projects by this point, and already in discussion with various educational and museological institutions about possible choreographic reconstructions and alternative uses for archival costumes (as part of interactive exhibits, for example, where they can be handled and worn by museum visitors), the 'problems' of the archive persisted. The weight of it overall had only increased with our investigative forays into Disintegration, Preservation, Transaction, and Display. Lea expresses to me a wish to 'put things out there' in the public domain as an insurance policy against the total erasure or loss of the archive. At some

8 At the time of writing, these archival droplets are available to view on Anderson's social media pages, including the Instagram account: @leaandersonscholmondeleys.

point, after all, it may become unfeasible economically and logistically to continue to house the archive. It may unavoidably be sold in a yard sale (as were the English National Opera costumes which I described earlier in this essay) or disposed of. The Archival Droplets allow us to engage not only with the costumes in the archive, but also the paper archive (playbills, letters, journals) and the technological equipment (reel to reel tapes, cassettes, CDs, VHS tapes, DVDs etc.). There is a determined aim to keep them light, in both content and physical weight – they are casual, humorous, and stored in data clouds to be shared on social media, rather than placed on hard drives or DVDs.

In short, they are another attempted solution to the 'problem' of performance remains and the dilemmas already outlined, which emerge in the face of their long survival post-performance. The problematic economies of value and worth, and the concept of costumes operating as trace repositories of knowledge, both associative and embodied. Dilemmas which arguably travel alongside a more complex question of where, exactly, the legacy and history of past performance works might reside. Is there an overarching need to reanimate the leftovers of vanished performances in the hope of a resurrection of sorts? Or, working from an acknowledgement of their innate partiality, might further fragmentation prove a novel way to reveal both the losses and the material persistence of performance legacies? Archival Droplets step up to this call, shattering and dispersing their source material. Carrying them forward on a journey, albeit fractured, which asks us to look again at the items in the costume archive. To think anew on how they might be best served. Crucially however, they undertake this questioning in a form which does not have a physical mass or measurable weight within the archive itself. Of course, it must be held in mind that virtual archival storage on an institutional scale, which depends on storage in data centres, does ultimately involve a physical mass of hardware and potentially significant weight, albeit residing elsewhere. In terms of physical burden relating to this individual archive however, these droplets occupy solely virtual space.

8. Two hardback books and why anyone might write them

Balanced together on a kitchen scales, they return a reading of 2061 grams

The first, a peer-reviewed monograph which focuses on the after lives of three individual costume artefacts as a means of unfolding practical and philosophical conside-

rations of performance remains, legacies of 'the live', and realizing a partial historiographic recuperation of two key UK dance companies. The second, a non-academic, visually led, edited artist book celebrating the 40th anniversary of two key UK dance companies, centering the work of the creative individuals involved, documenting a choreochronicle of all their performance works, and making a vast archive of photographs, artist journals and hand-designed posters accessible to a wide readership.

Even as I write extensively about the problematics of the 'stuff' left behind in performance's wake, I appear to be equally hellbent on creating more 'stuff' to be in the world – held in the hand or stacked on a shelf. Both publications – objects, in fact – which I was involved in creating, are relational, stake-filled ventures in and of themselves. They do not possess the weightless agility of an Archival Droplet. They are not as light as a dead butterfly, or even a hard drive. In the end, they may not be sold or distributed very widely due to being governed by a similar selection of economic and socio-cultural factors to the ones which attend most small-scale performance archives. They are unavoidably entangled with issues of visibility, market variability and the overall gaining and shedding of cultural kilos which I touched on in the opening of this essay. There is nonetheless something significant in that very action of taking up physical space (with commensurate weight) whilst also occupying a wider imaginative place within an interconnected network of practice.

I would like to suggest that each of these individual weights associated with an archive – that of a painted suit or a severed elastic or a book or a film – and the spaces which they inhabit, become important. Particularly so, if they reside (as all the objects listed, do) in a somewhat imperiled arts landscape of decreased funding and increased precarity. We ought to take account of them. Tot them up. There are a variety of potential answers to the questions which a performance archive asks of us. In attempting any response, it becomes necessary to engage in a far wider conversation, which traverses borders of academic discourse, performance practice and cultural heritage. It is imperative too, to circle attentively around the tensions between, for example, the artist and the scholar in collaboration, between the tangible and intangible, between the recuperable and the lost. Finally, any response to an archive demands implicitly that we recognize what could be at stake in relational, material research, and that we venture to make and take up space and weight – physically, virtually, imaginatively – as a means of recuperation and regeneration, however partial.•

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