

The Value Chamber: Performance and digital iterations across art, design and education

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Abstract

Through an integrated series of research and development activities this paper reports on a project that explored new ways of capturing value for small-to-medium arts organisations. The paper arises from the ARC funded Linkage Project 'Agile Opera: Chamber Opera in a New Era' undertaken by RMIT University in partnership with Chamber Made Opera, the Australia Council for the Arts and Federation Square Management.

The Agile Opera Project brings together university researchers and arts based practitioners to investigate new ways to capture value through a series of micro-labs (industry workshops), digital iterations of works, performance-exhibitions, and the development of a digital platform designed for small-to-medium arts SMA organisations.

Chamber Made Opera is connected to the traditions of performance which value the situated experience, in which artworks share the same space (chamber) as an audience, and inherits the sustained experimentalism of its art form. This paper reports how digital platforms can be used—aligned to the intrinsic values of a small-to-medium arts company—to translate live spatial performances into digital and spatial re-creations that we call Digiworks as they enable value to emerge through garnering new audiences, in new venues, through an enhanced portability of performance.

Through the interconnected layers of this research project, we seek to answer the question proposed for this conference: How do we continue to promote value in an increasingly conservative and short term economic context? In an environment in which arts organisation must move quickly and with agility, alliances formed within research and educational centres offer valuable opportunities to undertake deeper and valued work at a different tempo.

Keywords: performance research, digital design, chamber opera, spatial sound

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Introduction

Chamber Made Opera, now operating as Chamber Made, plays an influential role within Australia's contemporary arts. For the past two decades, the company has created original works at the nexus of music and performance, and is renowned for:

redefining artform boundaries and producing works that emerge from a deep collaborative dialogue across artform disciplines. Bringing contemporary composition and performance dramaturgy together in ever-shifting forms, our works have been presented in theatres, recital halls, lounge-rooms, galleries, as well as and on iPads and online. (Chamber Made 2017)

The partnership between Chamber Made Opera (CMO) and RMIT University developed over several years prior to the successful application for an ARC Linkage grant. The first collaborative project was in 2010 (*Manifest: Revealing auditory spatial performance*), while a second followed in 2012 (*The Box*). The Agile Opera Project (AOP) ARC Linkage grant commenced in 2013 to advance a new type of integrated performing arts company that aimed to:

1. research and transform the intellectual, artistic and social capital of a contemporary performing arts company via a series of interdisciplinary micro-labs;
2. research and develop new physical and virtual platforms for the sustained delivery of chamber opera in the 21st Century, and;
3. discover new modes of interaction between an Australian contemporary performing arts company and national and international sectors that return value.

Contemporary chamber opera, as an artform surviving in the 'tar pit of instrumental arguments, decontextualized data, and political opportunism' (Meyrick 2017), requires new conceptual models—grounded within the digital—to preserve the situated experience, and enable risk and experimentation. Chamber Made Opera, with its resilient heritage founded in the continuing and regenerative space of the chamber, offers a unique industry partner through which this research is explored.

The setting: Challenges of data and imposed operational models

Small-to-medium arts (SMA) organisations are sophisticated ecosystems characterised by deep expertise within their particular field of artistic endeavour. They create value in an increasingly

conservative and short-term economic environment where the only constant is change: in technology, modes of audience communication, policy and funding structures. While this is equally true for other organisations, SMAs have meagre resources upon which to draw in response to these changes, and little chance of building reserves for strategic initiatives. In Australia, the SMA sector comprises hundreds of organisations in the performing, visual and literary arts, working with small budgets, and lean personnel and administrative structures. These companies are vital to artform advancement, artist career development and cultural life (Department of Communication and the Arts 2002) and, yet, they are increasingly forced to defend the value of their work using a language of advocacy too often dominated by managerial imperatives.

For these organisations, the task of creating and capturing value is complicated by two interconnected issues: data and imposed operational models. Modern managerial structures emphasise data as metrics rather than content, with SMA required to produce measurable data for funding agencies, who then use these abstracted metrics to measure the organisation's performance. In academia, Orr and Orr (2016, p. 16) note that the overuse of metrics leads to 'The use of formal quantitative analytics rather than human judgment in evaluating the worth of individuals and actions', with Gittins (2017) making similar criticisms of KPIs in business. Within the arts, we might ask: What is the value of this data to the company, artists and management, and whose interest and agenda does it serve? With criteria pre-determined through the growing number of evaluative tools, how do new ideas, responses or criteria emerge for creative work? To what extent, even subliminally, do artists and companies play to the metrics?

This first issue is exacerbated by contemporary digital technologies enabling the amassing and low cost storage of data as documentation (high resolution images, audio, video). Confronting the large quantities of material generated provokes questions such as: What should we keep? How do we decide what is useful? What and how should we catalogue, index or tag material? Who should have access, and what form should access take? What and how do we capture and extend the value of this data? Should we focus on organising, searching, retrieving and reporting meta-data, or should we, instead, use this data to create textural (written or spoken) narratives or artworks that capture contemporary thoughts and responses?

The imposition of operational models that do not support the unique conditions of the sector — usually borrowed from business—create a second issue. SMAs press against dominant forces

more concerned with short-term value conversion than long-term value creation. As former Artistic Director of CMO David Young (2017) succinctly observes:

most arts companies in Australia operate ... from project to project, grant to grant, not knowing if they will be able to keep running or employ anyone next year, month, or week. In order to apply for funding, [they] are required to prepare business plans, but any small business ... that operated on this basis would stop trading immediately, file for bankruptcy and possibly be indicted for trading insolvent.

Toward a value creating ecosystem

For a sector wary of evaluative approaches that use data collection and metrics as blunt tools to measure quality and value—not to mention the likely funding and support repercussions—there is a crucial imperative to engage in this discussion. To do so, however, a new system of valorisation is required to ‘recast the axes of value’ (Guattari 1995, p. 91). This involves shifting the focus from short-term value conversion measured by success in achieving marketing and business objectives, to long-term value creation measured by contribution to new knowledge and practice, both social and artistic. Through this alternative lens, SMAs can be viewed as interrelating within a process of ‘reiterative feedback and co-creation’ (Hearn, Roodhouse & Blakey 2007, p. 422) in the space of discourse that arises between the artwork, artists, audience and the public (Warner 2002). Value is located and created in the co-operative and collaborative relationship between audience, artist, company and artwork, with SMAs operating as dynamic value creating ecosystems.

The chamber and the Internet

The *chamber* of chamber opera was, originally, a room in a private house (Radice 2012), but over time the precise form of the room has changed. From palaces and the homes of musicians, through village halls and small performance venues, to the auditorium-busting site-specific venues of the 20th century and digital spaces of the present moment, the chamber has altered along with patterns in arts patronage and education, changing music technologies and compositional practices.

The chamber, then, is not so much a room as a connected space that responds to the varying constraints on, and potentials of, performed music. Certainly, this space contains, like the heart of a labyrinth, contact between musicians and their audience, but its form is conditioned by the movement of forces beyond this particular manifestation. The networked movement of a music’s patrons, audiences, players and composers; their varied techniques of engagement and access

to resources; their changing needs and aspirations. The difficulty of explaining or seeing value in such networks is their interconnectedness: where connectivity increases the value of the whole beyond its constituents.

The Internet (a term derived from internetworking) is itself difficult to value as a physical always-on spatial system. Through its ease of use, the Internet makes us blind to the physical act of passing information from servers in remote countries via suboceanic cables and into our homes, businesses and universities (Blum 2012). The Internet is, thus, an apt metaphor for the networked and intangible elements creating and producing contemporary chamber opera. We see the outcomes but little of the personnel interconnections, performance repositories/archives/past knowledge, and developmental artefacts. In contrast, live performance—in space and time—sits opposite the always-on and on-demand nature of digital media. Within this tension, the AOP examines how the space of chamber opera unfolds within the semi-visible, dynamic, value creating ecosystem that enables its production.

Research approach: Three interconnected layers

The Agile Opera Project adopts a research approach concerned with ‘whole of company’, based on an understanding of CMO’s business, artistic and relational operations as interrelated layers of affect. This approach permits fruitful analyses, opportunities for examination and exploration, and the emergence of three interconnected layers: Microlabs (research methodology), Digiwork (unique forms of digital iterations) and a digital platform (tools to support the creation of digital iterations).

1. The Microlabs

The Microlabs are a three-year cycle (2015-2017) of half-yearly interdisciplinary workshops developed for the AOP and held in RMIT University’s Design Hub and Spatial Information Architecture Laboratory (SIAL) Sound Studios. Acting as an open bridge between the arts and the academy the workshops weave together the research environment of a university with the high-intensity production environment of a small arts organisation. The Microlabs consciously draw together people as knowledge agents who might not otherwise have the opportunity to collaborate, but who share common areas of interest. The workshops provide space in which these individuals—research associates, creative industry experts and the industry partner, Chamber Made Opera—can engage in multi-directional dialogue and exploration designed to create and capture value for CMO and the research project overall.

The Microlab workshops, held over 1.5 days, are based on a series of evolving topics. Each day is structured around three-hour sessions incorporating presentations, thematic discussions, collaborative mapping exercises and sector reports (Figure 1). Importantly, time between sessions and days allows space for critical self-reflexive practice (individual and collective), including overnight reflection (Pang 2016).

Microlab	Date	Program/topic/themes
Microlab 1	16-17 April 2015	First implementation of Microlab structure; early discussions of 'platform'; social role and function of digital technologies; research tools we might use; 'long-tail' economic issues.
Microlab 2	15-16 October 2015	Physical and digital (coded) spaces (experience, platforms, vocabulary, issues); Circus Oz Living Archive; mapping audience relationships; current funding issues (NPEA); liveness; expectation management; platform research.
Microlab 3	14-15 April 2016	Experience and neuroscience (Hooper); Artistic Associates model & strategic plan update; digiworks; intrinsic/extrinsic value - Trip Advisor for the Arts (Gruen); communication to arts & academic audiences; preparing for Agile Chambers.
Microlab 4	8 December 2016	Artistic production as ecology (organisation, audience, artist); documentation, archives, platforms & digital resonance; group mapping exercises.

Figure 1: Microlab series including dates, themes and participants.

The Microlabs have, to date, created a network of twenty-three artists, academics, writers and industry sector experts, collectively representing twenty-six disciplines (Figure 2).

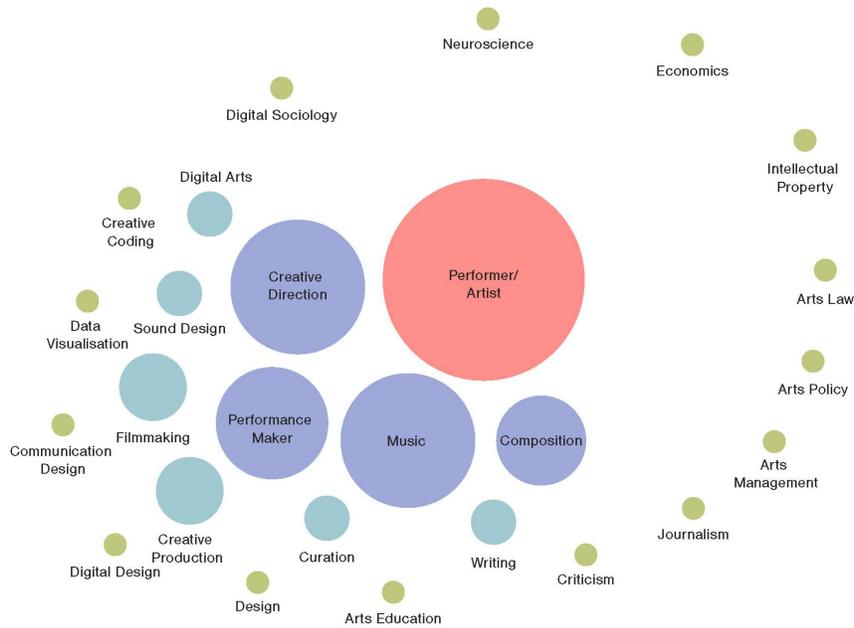


Figure 2: Microlab interdisciplinary network (Note: the larger circle size indicates more participants from that domain/discipline)

In this rich interdisciplinary environment, ideas and tentative propositions can be ‘floated’ within a space of dialogic encounter, using a supportive, flexible and responsive structure. This creates an in-between ‘thinking space’ (McCormack 2008) that intentionally addresses the tyranny of the present. It provides time for a fluid form of reflection often lost for organisations exposed to pressured rhythms and tempi, and institutional pressure to impose closure on creative exploration and research in the race to achieve immediate impact. The Microlab functions as a dynamic research device recognising and privileging the intrinsic value of human interaction and discourse.

By this stage of the project (2017), it is possible to trace the effect of particular ideas floated at early Microlabs, which have since gained dynamic energy, spinning off into various written, performed and published outcomes (Figure 3).

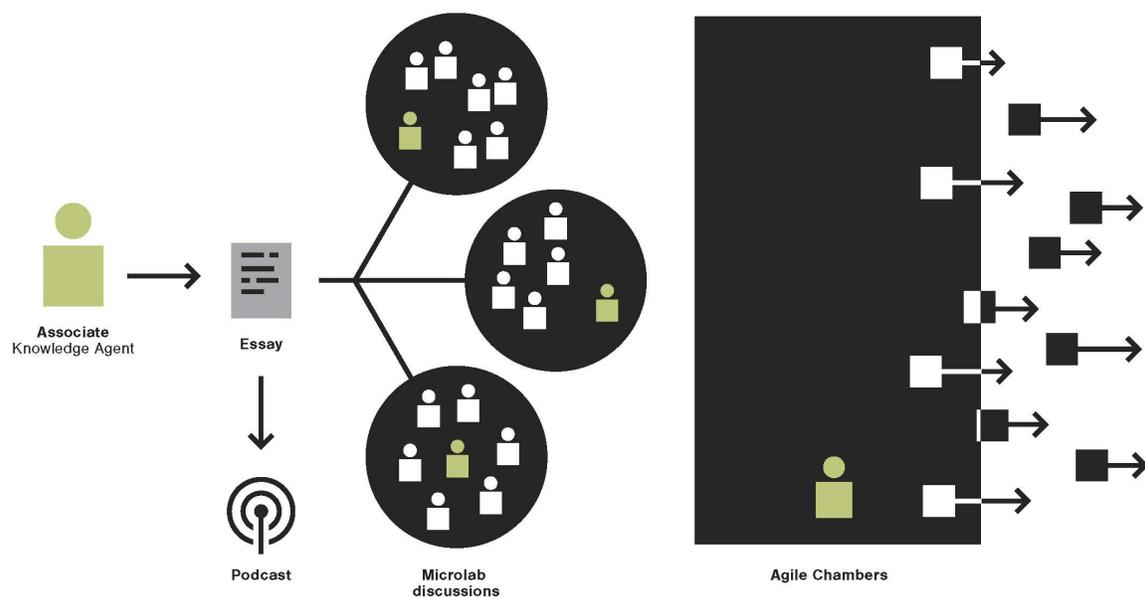


Figure 3: Research Associate as knowledge agent. Initial involvement in Microlab leads to commissioned essay, podcast, stakeholder discussions and exhibition project.

2. Digiworks

The AOP aims include the development of a platform to extend the long-tail of CMO's productions, allowing works to remain accessible in the public domain beyond initial showings. In addressing this research aim, the concept of the *Digiwork* emerged and was substantially investigated in the *Agile Chambers* exhibition in December 2016. A Digiwork is conceived as a digital iteration of a performance work that is a:

Stand-alone artwork that aligns with the themes and content of the original performance, but can be viewed, consumed and understood independently of the original performance. Digiworks may be presented in spaces or delivered via platforms outside of traditional performance spaces. Chamber Made may present a Digiwork in a range of ways, including public screenings, film or projection festivals, installations, open access exploratory labs, online or via other broadcast means such as radio or podcasts.

(Chamber Made 2017)

Digiworks enable value to emerge through garnering new audiences, in new venues, through an enhanced portability of performance. In the *Agile Chambers* performance and program in 2016, Digiwork versions of *Another Other*, *Turbulence*, *Permission to Speak* and *Captives of the City* were produced. The program included the original multi-channel video projections and spatial

sound design of *Another Other*, a performance with projections and spatial sound design of *Turbulence*, and the digital rat as interactive artwork from *Captives of the City*. The creative team and performers from *Permission to Speak* produced a studio recording of the work, split over individual channels to investigate a new spatialisation. The exhibition infrastructure was then used for a workshop to begin exploring how *Permission to Speak* could tour as a spatial sound installation. At present, creative development is about to commence on a fifth work, *Between 8 and 9*. The Digiwork of this performance will translate the original performance environment of live musicians and audience seated at a series of large round tables, to a single table incorporating a spatial sound design, projection mapping and interactive components.

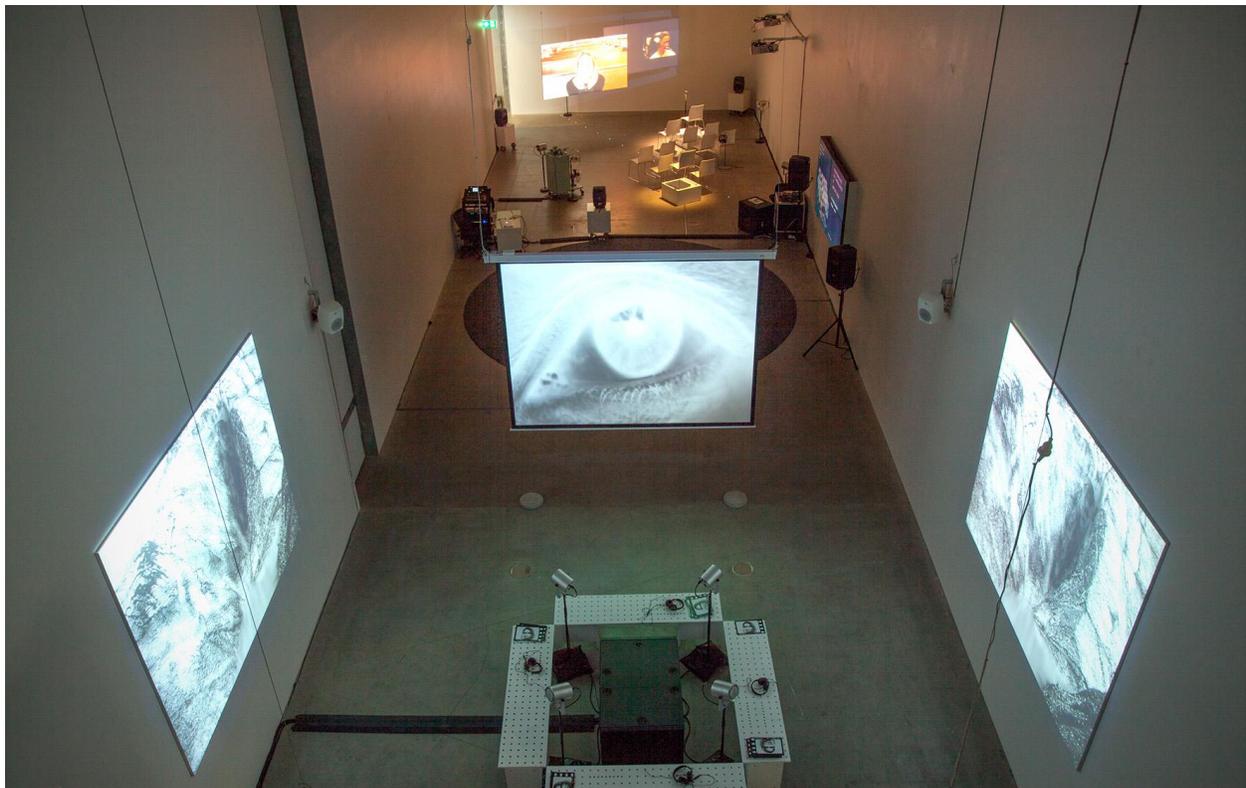


Figure. 3: *Agile Chambers*, RMIT Design Hub 5-10 December 2016. In the foreground, projection screens and 8 channel sound system for *Another Other*. The screens were retracted and the speaker system used for *Permission to Speak*. In the centre of the space, an area for workshops and guest artist/researcher talks. The diagonally hanging screens in the background mark the performance area for *Turbulence*.

3. Digital platforms

The AOP seeks to respond to the proliferation of digital platforms for the arts within the context of arts marketing and communication. *Audience Atlas* and *Culture Counts* claim a range of benefits to improve marketing efficiency (Moore 2015; Arts Victoria 2014) and *The Platform* aims to support communication between artists and organisations in the Australian Community Arts and Cultural Development sector (Australia Council 2015).

In contrast, the AOP is developing an alternative form of platform, oriented toward artists and SMA, which supports the creation of digital iterations. The project devised a suite of digital experiments to support distinct issues that arise when developing digital iterations. These issues, identified through analysis of CMOs Digiwork program, include the difficulty of scoping a digital work for a creator working in the performing arts; the difficulty of maintaining momentum of a performance work after its initial presentation; and the difficulty of managing and adding value to the digital materials generated in the creation of a performance work. Digital tools to address these difficulties are in development as part of the AOP, and currently include digital asset management software, rehearsal documentation, sharing and note-taking software, and a Digiwork primer tool.

Concluding observations

The Agile Opera Project aspires to preserve and amplify the essential nature of the situated experience of chamber performance and investigate new types of integrated performing arts company. The ‘whole-of-company’ approach, with the development of the three integrated layers, ensures that research outcomes align with the company, both in scale and resources. Through this research, the industry partner, Chamber Made Opera, has been supported to develop a versatile, ever-evolving aesthetic and pragmatic set of relationships with digital technology that serves the artwork, the company and its audiences, and works to capture value. Within this new paradigm, digital technology has a fully integrated voice in the creative process, defined by the diverse ways in which it refuses borders and serves to mediate and amplify the company’s artistic activity and its administrative and business practices. We conclude this paper with three observations about the challenges faced when promoting value in an increasingly conservative and short-term economic context.

The Microlab workshops provide evidence of the value of blending arts-based industry partners with academic creative-practice research. This merging of cultures builds valuable intellectual alliances and interdisciplinary networks that successfully extend the portfolio of skills and expertise typically represented within a SMA and its board of management. The Microlabs draw

on partnerships which provide the company with perspectives beyond the everyday task of running the organisation. Through the Microlabs, the industry partner is afforded an opportunity to reconsider a wide range of ideas, approaches and opportunities across their art-making, societal and political positioning, or their use of technological platforms. This process facilitates the removal of access barriers in order to achieve conditions essential for the sharing of ideas and knowledge. This, in turn, increases the SMA's capacity to address systemic issues, including congested workloads inhibiting 'thinking space' and interdisciplinary exchange, and day-to-day activities of survival (fundraising, reporting, administration).

By increasing knowledge about capturing value for SMAs, the Agile Opera Project expands understanding of how value is conceived and communicated in the industry sector and the academy, and contributes to the vital call for a 'new approach' to a shared meaningful language of advocacy (Meyrick 2017). While a universally-understood language of value is an ideal, the reality is that all actors within the sector have always spoken, and will likely continue to speak, different dialects to those within the wider environment in which they exist. So it becomes incumbent upon SMAs to find an activated language that affirms value in a way which also protects and furthers it, rather than selling it out to dominant managerialist approaches that blithely evaluate and organise its (diminishing) future.

Finally, through scrutinising and supporting the development of Chamber Made Opera's artworks in the digital domain through re-stagings, iterations (or Digiworks), the tension between live performance and online content is examined. In this space of value, differences and similarities between live and digital experience can be explored: on and offline, in space and in any place, resulting in a more nuanced picture of the interconnected terrain in which the company resides and affects. The chamber is re-envisaged as a vibrant connected space in which a multiplicity of influences, each with diverse and evolving drives, come together to inform and influence the wider discourse as a vital counter-balance to the dominant socio-political agendas. It is here, within this critical and reflexive thinking space, that the conversation about creating and capturing value commences.

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