HARC Amateur Studies Forum 1

Meeting Date: 5/5/2016
Meeting Location: Bedford Room
Recorded by: Jenny Swingler

Agenda

Introduction: Helen Nicholson
Presentations: Libby Worth
Discussion: David Gilbert
Thinking Forward: Judith Hawley

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Introduction (led by Helen Nicholson)

HN:
- Genesis of the project came from various meetings between Helen, David, Libby and Judith, all of whom are researching the amateur in different contexts and settings.
- Amateurism currently having a cultural moment. How far are the shifting notions of the amateur redefining culture?
- ‘Amateur Studies’ a phrase ripe to be coined as there is an increasing need to reconsider long running amateur practices, how they are negotiated with the professional and their contribution to cultural life.
- Is there a collection of thinking at Royal Holloway that deals with this that could be enriched by informal meetings?

LW:
- Format of meeting is to generate connections and discussion or dissonance rather than defending a paper.
- Each participant has been asked to respond by bringing an object relating to their area of study. This will provide the focus of a short presentation and, through referencing the object’s material properties, open contrasting ways of thinking through the research to include – tones, textures, rhythms etc. The aim is to generate contrasting ways to communicate ideas and to open up innovative ways of working together across the diverse fields represented here.
- Each presentation has 4 mins allocated and will end with a research question (25 word limit).
**Presentations** (led by Libby Worth)

**Matthew Cohen**
Object: Photo of Masquerade in West Java.
- Photo taken in Indonesia during Ramadan and shows a Masquerade. A group of people in full scale dress passing through the neighbourhood. The custom being that travelling ensembles would awake the locals with musical accompaniment. The dancers are not professional and often the musicians are in training but only a few have professional ambitions.
- The term ‘amateur’ would not be applied to this group of individuals as the activity is under a religious guise.
- Question: Is amateur the relevant term for this kind of performance?

**David Gilbert**
Object: A Kneeler/Hassock from an Anglican church in Ealing.
- Made in the late 70’s early 80’s by a working party of women from the congregation. Forty-five were made by them in total.
- Object highlights three points.
  1) The kneeler shows a Piccadilly line tube train. Interesting to be said about the amateur and how we define place. We don't see in other art forms that same relationship between craftwork and place.
  2) If the kneeler had been made in a non-religious context it would be seen as amateur. Religious activities not seen as creative.
  3) What is relationship between what we see as amateur and other types of categories that share the same characteristics e.g. Volunteering.
- Question: What part do lay activities have in relation to notions of the professional?

**Jane Hamlett**
Object: Photograph of Doreen Bud and family.
- Doreen Bud was a domestic servant and housewife who lived in Hampshire. She left a huge archive including diaries and photographs of her life.
- How useful is it to think of this photo as an amateur production?
- Photography was, in 19th Century Britain thought of as an amateur activity—there were amateur photography magazines and societies.
- In the digital age photography has lost that sense of being amateur.
- Art Historians have often drawn the difference between professional and amateur and photos, such as Doreen's, would not be seen as having aesthetic value by traditional Art Historians. Such photos have been neglected as aesthetic value has been privileged over emotional value.
- Question: Is there a way of reinventing the term ‘amateur’ that gets around the problem of elitism regarding the aesthetic?
Judith Hawley
Object: Image from the play ‘The Court of Oberon: or, The Three Wishes’ by Countess of Hardwicke performed in the 1790s and published in 1831.
- Play was written to be performed for a private audience in Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire.
- Elizabeth Yorke, Countess of Hardwicke dedicated her play to be sold as part of a charity bazaar organized by Queen Victoria to raise money for the indigent Irish.
- Some of the performers were later to go on to run the country. Can’t be seen as a ‘leisure activity’ as participants don’t work in the way defined by the capitalist division between work and play.
- Question: Can we use the term amateur to cover all kinds of activity? How does my upcoming production of the play in 2017 fit into notions of the amateur?

Natalie Hyacinth
Object: Dub Siren.
- Dub Siren is a symbol of creativity for music production that takes place in home studios. Named ‘Bedouin producers’ they are often those who cannot afford studio time.
- Inherently political object as it relates to access to studios and professional lessons that people cannot afford.
- Company that sells equipment also part of network as they undercut the idea that equipment must be bought from companies like Sony.
- Goes against the concept of ‘professional sounds’ that are clean and radio friendly. Expensive session band not necessary. Money not needed to make music.
- Church in Ealing has a studio and for them it is very much a professional studio.
- Question: Is the concept of being amateur intrinsically political regarding issues of access? Have they chosen to be amateur or are they amateur because of an inability to access equipment and studio time?

Helen Nicholson
Object: Photographs of British Airways Entertainment Society from February 1971.
- Interested in amateur time and labour and the rhythms that become a central part of everyday life. An annual rhythm is created.
- Thinking about the idea of amateurism has been solely in relation to product rather than as a process. What happens if amateur creativity is thought of in relation to different temporal registers involved in participating in amateur activity?
- Interested in finding a new way of rethinking amateurism away from the idea of leisure time.
- BA also sits in different temporalities; crew often move between different time zones, and their lives are constrained by time in unusual ways: one member
may be coming back from a long haul flight or missing from a rehearsal as they are in the air.
- Various archives of amateur theatre from the participants – Dee Bull from BACCES offered her photograph albums.
- Photo is in some way an advertisement of labour of Cabin Crew and performances often include a number performed in uniform. A reference to their own labour.
- Question: Can we think of amateur time as a way of reconstructing the concept of the amateur?

Cara Gray
Object: A Ladykillers thank you card from Jim Anderson (member of Garden City amateur dramatics society) on last night of show.
- Set was built by society over four months. Audience were not witness to the process of assembling set.
- Card is a thank you for being part of a constant process of improvising, renewing and recycling.
- Process of set building in the amateur world is often thought of as unspectacular or mundane. Often undocumented by the company and only remembered by story, collective memory or gifts.
- Interested in people who participate in amateur practice and how they record their practice. Forms a type of archive.
- Question: When are these memories brought together into a collective archive?

Molly Flynn
Object: Coins with inscribed text from amateur dramatics society in Massachusetts.
- Inspired by the intensity of the experience of being a member of the society as a teenager.
- Inward looking tendency of that society can be found in other amateur societies regarding racial diversity.
- Question: Is this inward looking tendency a common thing among amateur societies and is that what makes those communities so especially generative?

Libby Worth
Object: Grass with its roots
- Research project on folk dance in Newcastle. Within project already remarking a tension between maintaining authenticity and wanting to change.
- Folk dance groups are beginning to respond to environments in which they find themselves. Morris Offspring work with a Choreographer (Laurel Swift), which is rare, and are going towards a form of professionalism.
- Other companies are bringing in hip-hop, tango and other dance forms yet remaining within the folk tradition and the amateur.
- The grass will be cut and mown. If you let the grass grow it will seed. This relates to how dances disperse themselves in the wider world.
- Question: What are the values driving amateur clog/rapper dancers in Newcastle and North East England?

Discussion (led by David Gilbert)
Six points that come to mind as a possible path to follow.

1) How do we define ‘the amateur’, and what are the boundaries of the category. It’s not the only starting point, but Robert Stebbins’s book Serious Leisure (2007) is an important marker, not least because it takes the amateur seriously (obviously) and provides a critique of some the usual binary assumptions between amateur and professional.

2) Space and Place. The examples that we have discussed often have both a particularity and intensity that relate to localism, and to a sense of place. Amateur creativity often expresses what we might describe as ‘micro-geographies’. Part of our brief might therefore be about the distinctive geographical forms of amateur practices, networks and movements? We might too think about how this fits models of expertise – in a culture that often dismisses the local and ‘parochial’ in ways that are bound up with critiques of the amateur.

3) Time. Alongside thinking about space, we might also think about time – for example, about how the category of the amateur relates to a rather specific division between working time and leisure time – to generalize, it’s a model of working time and non-working time that seems to universalize midC20th western male working patterns, in the rhythms of the working day, week and year, but also over the life-course. How do debates about ‘post-work’, flexibility, enforced leisure etc. impact our sense of the amateur? How do changing perspectives about retirement and ‘life-long learning’ impact our sense of the amateur? Some of our discussions also pick up on different sense of time and rhythm, notably divisions between the traditional and the modern – is the category of ‘the amateur’ something that works only in ‘modern times’?

4) Amateur aesthetics. An emerging theme in our objects and discussions. Is there a distinctive amateur aesthetic? There seemed to be an emergent issue about reuse, ‘vernacular’ or ‘everyday’ materials or a pride in recycling particularly when faced with limited resources. There are issues too about the significance of technologies that give the amateur to chance to produce something that ‘looks professional’ - obviously connected to discussions about the history of photography (Benjamin on ‘mechanical reproduction’ and loss of ‘aura’ is an obvious reference point), but also digital media, and potentially 3-D printing etc.

5) Archives/ Records/ Sources. These discussions point to the significance of material archives in the study of the amateur – are there distinctive challenges to the way that we research amateur histories? And how do we archive/preserve such histories.

6) Individuals and Collectives. Amateur creativity throws up issues about the relationship between the individual and the importance of sociability. It may be that the ultimate goals of amateur arts and crafts for example do not lie in the qualities of the art-work, but in the quality of
human interrelations. Is this fair – how different from professionalized arts activities? Issues raised about significance of social capital and self-development or self-actualisation. Worth thinking too about how we approach ‘amateur’ creativity in other contexts – e.g. religious worship or political protest.

JaneH: Self-actualization takes us towards a more positive way of seeing amateurism. There are amateur activities that are cast as better because they are outside of a professional space.

NH: Amateur techniques developed in bedrooms are adopted by music industry. The amateur and the professional feed into each other.

JH: Difficult to fix the amateur as the amateur experience can be adopted by the professional.

MF: How we as a culture are looking to consume more of the real? The connection we have with the amateur as spectators can seem more sincere.

MC: Interesting relationship in Indonesia to taking money as akin to professional prostitute.

MF: How does amateurism relate to class? Is this a wider issue?

JH: Perception of amateurism doesn’t hold a great deal of cultural cachet in theatre but does in music.

Thinking Forward (led by Judith Hawley)

JH:
- What types of things do we want to do?
- Two more meetings to be scheduled for the Autumn Term.
- Plan to document and record with photos, notes and a webpage.
- Do we want to create more projects together in the form of making and writing?

HN:
- Performance Studies to be contacted for potential to put together essays, photo essays and links to websites regarding amateurism.
LW:
- Possibility to open it up to people beyond Royal Holloway. Something to be thought about.
- We will create webpages - based for the time being on the Drama, Theatre and Dance Department’s website. These will include documentation of events and space for participants to contribute through Google docs.

JH If you would like to contribute to the Google docs below, clicking on the link should take you direct to the pages.

1. A taxonomy of the amateur: https://docs.google.com/document/d/149rio3VFBl49hISpPwwxitG-1iSiNy5SSzXTskfEgY/edit?usp=sharing
2. A Manifesto: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qg371Kti00l99liVlOG2Q18vhgSn1D4nzn_woptNpc/edit?usp=sharing
3. Questions and methodological issues: https://docs.google.com/document/d/149rio3VFBl49hISpPwwxitG-1iSiNy5SSzXTskfEgY/edit?usp=sharing