

Calling in the dark: identifying our ephemera files

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Art ephemera are an evocative resource that can document innovative art and convey diverse histories. This article looks at the relationship between such ephemera and contemporary art practices, and at the relative values given to ephemera by artists, curators and librarians and, in this context, considers integrated catalogues and online guides as methods of re-contextualising art ephemera in the library. Recent collaborative initiatives, and projects that identify and locate artists' files are reviewed and three themes are identified: the biographical approach, interfaces for distributed catalogues and the integration of art and its documentation.

Art ephemera are visually and textually evocative, and are a vast supplement to the documentation contained within art libraries. As Julie Ault, editor of the ground-breaking study *Alternative art New York* states, art ephemera 'convey the visual strategies of the times when they were made'.¹ The potential of these collections of ephemera remains largely unrealised, since description of their contents has been limited, access difficult and circulation restricted, although they form a particularly valuable source of information on innovative contemporary practices and show different attitudes, methodologies, styles and perspectives employed by artists, curators and other participants. However, over the past decade there have been a growing number of large-scale projects that map or showcase these collections in order to facilitate access and promote their use and appreciation. This article reviews some of these projects and puts them into the context of factors that have influenced these developments. They include increasing appreciation by curators of ephemera as a source, and particularly a recognition of the relationship between art ephemera and 'alternative' and avant-garde practices; secondly the development of digital technology for managing online databases, images and other digital objects in catalogues and hierarchical links which will enable us to draw out the relations between an

ephemeron and other entities; and thirdly, the sharing of knowledge between libraries, archives, museums and art itself, both in practice, in projects which cross borders between these domains, and theoretically, in influencing our strategic approaches to our role as art librarians, for example in recognising how libraries de-contextualise and re-contextualise items they hold.

Recently I became responsible for planning how to catalogue the Women's Art Library/Make collection at Goldsmiths College Library,² which includes 9,500 artists' files on women artists and also files on related institutions. As a result I have been considering existing models and projects and it is from this standpoint that I here describe various projects across the UK, Europe and the USA. After discussing the 'relative values' of ephemera from the archival, library and curatorial sectors, I outline the two main tools used to map ephemera: standard library cataloguing procedures and web portals that include data from other catalogues. Finally I cite some interesting art ephemera collections in the UK, in order to give some idea of the scale and significance of material available, and then review a number of recent, innovative projects intended to identify and locate ephemera files.

Relative values

A growing body of literature affirms the value of contemporary art ephemera in documenting activities and events that play a significant part in contemporary and innovative art practices, which may themselves also be ephemeral or transient. In her introduction to *Alternative Art New York*, Julie Ault makes a strong case for ephemera as source material, and they are reproduced extensively throughout the book. The contributors use ephemera as source material as they recount and analyse histories of the 'alternative' movement in New York from multiple perspectives. However Ault notes that documentation of ephemeral events – protests, meetings, actions, installations, exhibitions, temporary public art and items from the paper trails of short-lived groups – is least likely to be found in library collections, and comments that 'What becomes history is to some degree determined by what is archived'.³ In 1995 Clive Phillpot observed that acquisition of ephemera by art libraries had often been 'somewhat passive', although he pointed out the value of the resulting unique sets of resources that reflect 'that institution's unique geographic and intellectual environment',⁴ adding that these unique resources may give the library a distinctiveness for researchers. The changing and fluid configurations of the contemporary art environment mean that varied collections are built up for many reasons; as a critical mass they represent the art world but individually they are often fragmentary.

Acquired collections

Libraries are also likely to acquire ephemera collections built up by others. Some significant and substantial collections containing ephemera have been actively compiled for strategic reasons, which give them distinctive values as research resources. A number of collections that began as support organisations for artists from the 1970s onwards are now housed within academic libraries. They may arrive as archives, such as the PAD/D archive, or as libraries, like the Women's Art Library/Make collection. Both these resources were built up for and by artists, they contain a large number of files holding ephemera, and their originating aims remain evident in the kind of materials they contain.

The Women's Art Library (MAKE), was established in the late 1970s as a slide library and grew into a research collection on women artists and their work. At the beginning, members sent slides of their work to this artist-run organisation, often

accompanied by their own statements or CVs, so that they could be viewed in a public space, by unanticipated visitors. Ephemera such as private view cards and press releases, the artist's statement produced for an exhibition, and photocopies of reviews from magazines, were collected as evidence of the activities of women artists. The collection now also has an 'archival' function, as a collective archive of women artists, of women's cultural practices and of the activity of producing the resource itself. The Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) archive, now at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), is an example of a working resource that entered a library as an organised archive. This artists' collective, conceived by Lucy Lippard in 1979, was active until 1988. For some ten years the group distributed documentation of political art amongst themselves. In 1989, after this phase ended, the collection of documentation was deposited in MoMA library as an archive. PAD/D's stated goal was to 'provide artists with an organized relationship to society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system'.⁵ Both these collections show how specific concerns and strategies can influence the resulting resource.

Artists, artworks and curators

Art ephemera have an older, established relationship to avant-garde art. The Jean Brown Collection at the Getty Library,⁶ which includes significant ephemera, is well known. It includes archives and ephemera from 20th-century avant-garde artists from the 1920s onwards, through Fluxus to mail art, movements that took place outside traditional galleries. More recently ephemera have been produced as part of art practices that are not object-based but conceptual, or which are concerned with contexts of art and its presentation, or situation. In comparison to the more traditional 'primary source' material of the artist's statement, and valuable as a commentary on or explanation of art or artists' working practices, this kind of ephemera comments on, or functions as, artwork, or is produced by artists/ curators to mediate the experience of art. In the introduction to the *Life/live* exhibition catalogue from 1996, which was a survey of artist-run spaces in London in the 1990s, the curator of the Musée d'art Moderne in Paris, Suzanne Pagé, comments that 'in addition to pursuing their own creative work, these artists also take charge of its distribution and communication, adopting a Situationist-style do-it-yourself

approach'.⁷ Here the context of art is part of the artists' or curator's practice and ephemera may document this directly. Art ephemera have in the past frequently been shown as supporting material in art exhibitions, as in the London section of *Century Cities*,⁸ but as the material has become better appreciated by the curatorial world, there have been many exhibitions consisting of ephemera, or which represent the process of its accumulation. For the exhibition *Extra art*, Steven Leiber and Todd Alden introduced the term 'artists' ephemera' to define printed matter that functions, to greater or lesser degrees, in the manner of artworks.⁹ The project *Interarchive*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, was formed from a vast accumulation of ephemeral and archival material; the *Bankside Browser* project curated by Andrew Renton to accompany the building of Tate Modern in London, consisting of archive folders from local artists to represent their work; and the project called *B+B Archive*, by the curatorial team B+B, in which they collect and sometimes show material they have collected 'in order to map emerging practices and to investigate strategies to re-present process-based projects',¹⁰ are just three examples of many which show explorations of ephemera in exhibitions.

the presentation of art, it may itself be artwork and it may function as documentation or as the material evidence of a process. We can see a blurring of roles between curator and artist, and also between what we would define in a library as an 'archive' or a 'collection of ephemera'. The material produced by an organisation reflects its activities, thus giving it an 'archival' function, and libraries too may contain archives of projects or organisations. This crossing of terms and definitions is part of the territory. We have material which is both visual and textual, has everyday, direct qualities from being produced at the time of events by those involved, is fragmentary but a valuable source both in its individual fragments and/or as a critical mass, can be produced as art, or as a side-effect of art and art's contextualisation. In a library this material can form a kind of 'artificial archive', which is de-contextualised by being held there, and which we re-contextualise in the way we manage and catalogue it. This review categorises three of the ways we re-contextualise collections: biographical approaches, interfaces for distributed databases and projects that integrate digital representations of art and its documentation. But before discussing these, I would like to refer to the two main approaches to cataloguing ephemera.



B+B Archive

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Contextualising and re-contextualising ephemera

The examples given above indicate that ephemera may be produced by artists or others involved with

Description and access

As more flexible electronic cataloguing methods have become available, there have been initiatives that attempt to make artist's files and other types of ephemera collections on art more visible.

Developments in electronic cataloguing and information-sharing protocols mean that catalogue records produced in one database can easily be re-used by being imported into or presented in another online resource (see the examples *European-art.net* and *arlis.net* below). At the same time, developments in digital imaging and availability of digital object

management systems mean that items can be represented visually in catalogues. As Michael Twyman¹¹ has observed, in the context of ephemera studies, digital technology has the potential to make a huge impact on the visibility of ephemera. Two

mainstream routes are available to reach this goal. One is to include ephemera files in library catalogues and larger bibliographic utilities (using collection-level entries at file level), the other is to produce web guides that provide collection-level descriptions or summary statements to identify and locate files across collections.

Artist's files and ephemera in art libraries

In libraries, art ephemera are usually stored in files termed Artists' Files (or Artist Files, vertical files or ephemera files) and these, rather than the individual items within them, appear on the library's catalogue. Files are maintained for galleries and other institutions as well as for individual artists. The files in each collection contain unique selections of material, and a shared location list would not necessarily indicate what each file held, any more than library catalogues do. Digitisation of files has been explored in some projects, such as European-art.net¹² and CIAO,¹³ as a way of providing access to ephemeral material. However, the problem of giving more visibility to art ephemera and artists' files already held in libraries has featured regularly as a topic at IFLA, ARLIS/NA and ARLIS/UK & Ireland conference sessions and workshops throughout the past decade, indicating the ongoing interest in this subject. Access remains an issue and calls for joint action continue.

The RLG Union Catalog includes some entries for ephemera files, although these are contributed by only a small number of libraries. The RLG Art and Architecture Group 'Inaccessible Domain' Materials Working Group,¹⁴ which considered the problem of how to provide access to ephemera and similar materials, produced a minimal record for collection level catalogue entries, which has since been adopted by BIBCO.¹⁵ Records for files catalogued in this way can be searched alongside entries for books, in an integrated approach.¹⁶ This model has been employed by several major libraries. The library catalogues of MoMA, the UK's National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Hyman Kreitman Research Centre for the Tate Library and Archive at Tate Britain, include large numbers of ephemera files. In their catalogue records, the genre of the material is defined and the contents of such files are described in a generic note, for example MoMA library Artists' files/Pamphlet files consist of a folder that 'may include announcements, clippings, press releases, brochures, reviews, invitations, small

exhibition catalogs, and other ephemeral material'.¹⁷ The National Art Library Artists' Information files 'typically contain a mix of private view cards for exhibitions, newspaper or periodical cuttings, offprints and press releases, slides or photographs, leaflets, promotional flyers, and hand-outs, often generated by the artists themselves'. The main entry in each case is the name of the artist, or institution, and the title is generic, usually Artists' file, Pamphlet file, or Ephemera file.

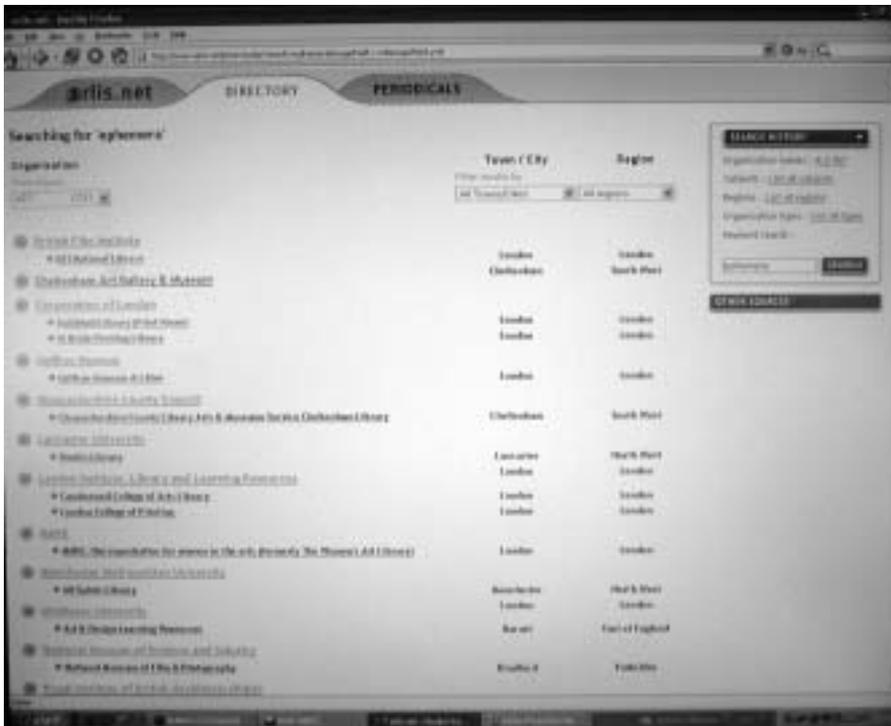
The scope of ephemera collections in the UK

In England there are many publicly accessible research collections of ephemera and archival material on contemporary art in national libraries and archives, in public institutions and in the libraries of art colleges and universities. The following is a brief account, giving some idea of the quantity of material to be considered.

In addition to the ephemera held by the National Art Library and Tate Library mentioned above, the British Council Visual Arts Library, which has developed to support the curatorial work of that department, holds books and catalogues as well as 2000 files of exhibition announcements, press cuttings and biographies on post-war artists who were either born or live in Britain. These include hard-to-find materials and ephemera. Academic institutions have also developed or accommodated wide-ranging collections of exhibition documentation and artists' ephemera. Chelsea School of Art Library has a particularly good collection of art ephemera and artists' ephemera, discussed in a report on art ephemera in art libraries in New York and London by Elizabeth Lawes and Vicky Webb.¹⁸ The Diversity Archive, formerly the African and Asian Visual Arts Archive (AAVAA), housed at University of East London, was established in 1988 by Eddie Chambers, who has stated the importance and value to Black artists of keeping and making available proper records of exhibitions and other related activities, for research.¹⁹ Panchayat is an archive of documentation on contemporary visual artists producing issue-based work around cultural identity, housed at the University of Westminster. The visual arts organisation inIVA exists to bring the work of artists from culturally-diverse backgrounds to the attention of the widest possible public; it has a library and archive which contains artists' files and project archives, as well as an online archive.

Whilst most of the libraries I mention here do catalogue their ephemera on their web catalogues to some extent, there is no collective finding aid or scoping and many other institutions have little or no electronic access to their ephemera files. Arlis.net²⁰ does describe UK art library collections, and is being developed to do so at a deeper level, but is currently able to identify only a few ephemera collections.

ARLIS/UK & Ireland's 2002 conference included a workshop run by Liz Lawes and Vicky Webb on art ephemera; following this, a mailing list²¹ was established, some members of which have continued to discuss the possibility of a 'union' catalogue for UK art ephemera collections and have recently begun liaison with the ARLIS/NA Artist Files Working Group.



arlis.net, showing search results for 'ephemera'.

'best practices' page for artists' files was proposed. The notes from the 2006 meeting of this group²² show development of this idea to cover recommendations for cataloguing and access, and for creating artists' files.

The background to this project can be traced in the long-standing interests of the RLG and ARLIS/NA members. As already mentioned, in the late 1990s the Research Libraries Group project 'Inaccessible Domain' considered ways to improve access to material such as ephemera, including artists' files and other types of documentation defined as catalogues, clippings, visual resources, architectural records, documents, all of which were considered partially 'hidden collections'.²³ This group has continued to work on artists' files, the

emphasis being on participation by member libraries in the RLG Union Catalog. In 2004 the ARLIS/NA Artists' Files Working Group was set up and this has since met annually. Notes of the meeting held that year say that 'a diverse group of interests were expressed: ranging from institutions with limited or no electronic access to files, those pursuing independent databases, those who have already added files to their local catalogs and larger bibliographic utilities (RLG, OCLC), those who wish to undertake digitization projects, individuals who were more interested in the potential for an increase in name authority records'.²⁴ Amongst these diverse interests, the web-based directory plan was prioritised.

Collective progress towards access

The ARLIS/NA Artist Files Working Group's current project to produce an online directory of artist files seems likely to make a North American directory a possibility. Notes from the meeting at the ARLIS/NA conference in 2005 report the group's decision that 'Ultimately, it was agreed upon to produce a double-pronged approach: encourage the future addition and migration of minimal level artists' file records to bibliographic utilities, while simultaneously creating a web-based directory of institutions and their holdings that would ideally be mounted on the Arlis/NA web site'. In addition, a

Collaborative projects

Over the past ten years, many projects have investigated the potential of web-based portals and joint catalogues to represent ephemera collections held in libraries or archives.

Biographical approach

Artists' files are compiled as resources about individual artists, and often provide unique evidence of their life and career; therefore it is reasonable and useful to use artists' names to identify holdings and

to include biographical information in an index to such files. A number of projects take this biographical approach, and aim to locate files held on artists in libraries and archives. The National Gallery of Canada Library's *Artists in Canada* is a well-established list that identifies the locations of files on Canadian artists, with biographical and bibliographic references.²⁵ The IFLA Section of Art Libraries Medium term programme 1998-2001 included the objective of investigating the possibility of creating an online database containing biographical information on artists born after 1950. While a biographical index on such a large scale remains a future possibility, other online projects have been established which index artists in a particular country, such as the UK *Artists' papers register* or have a particular focus, like WAAND (Women Artists' Archives National Directory) in the USA.

The aim of the *Artists' papers register*²⁶ was to compile a computerised register of papers and primary sources relating to artists, designers and craftspeople located in publicly accessible collections in the UK and this is now a useful finding aid. WAAND²⁷ is being developed by Rutgers University Libraries: it is an online integrated directory that 'directs users to primary source materials of and about women artists and women artists' organizations active in the U.S. since 1945'. The project website started operating during 2005 and has founding institutional partners that include the Archives of American Art, MoMA Museum Archives and the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. Repositories are asked to contribute by filling in an online form, and artists are invited to provide information about their archives and papers. It is also part of the remit of the project to encourage artists to 'organize their papers for donation to an appropriate research collection'. Another project that encourages the creation of archives as well as mapping them is the *About Art Spaces Archives Project (AS-AP)*.²⁸ This online resource maps the archival heritage of living and defunct for- and not-for-profit spaces, from the 'alternative' or 'Avant-garde' movement of the 1950s to the present, throughout the United States. The initial project to provide an index of places and spaces began in 2004. The prospectus for this project argues for the role of ephemera as a historical source, and aims to encourage the organisation of archives as well as to provide an access tool.

Interfaces for distributed catalogues

The libraries and archives in art galleries collect ephemera amongst other documentary, archival and bibliographic material. Such libraries and archives

may, but are equally likely not to, participate in shared cataloguing schemes. Vektor²⁹ was a Culture2000 EU-funded project to research the potential and problems of sharing information on contemporary artists in European archive collections in a web-based catalogue. The project investigated whether it would be feasible to use the Dublin Core³⁰ to make a joint catalogue for both digitised material and physical items. The partners included basis wien (the Austrian national contemporary art documentation centre), the Documenta Archive at Kassel, Galleria Moderna in Ljubljana, the Archives de la Critique de l'Art in Rennes and the Hansard Gallery in Southampton. Nine countries were represented. Some had existing electronic catalogues but these used different standards and many were offline. During the project, a small part of this information was presented in the forum's database to form a joint catalogue. The working language of the project was English. Critical issues that were explored by the project were differences between archival and library cataloguing practices, both at the basic level of organisation, and in rules of data entry and vocabulary. Names, for example, appear differently in different languages due to differences in translation and transliteration, diacritics can cause problems for searches, and names can change over time, particularly in formerly communist Eastern European countries, so it was agreed that the form of the name in use where the person concerned was a citizen at the time of the creation of the material should be employed, while reference was made to authority files such as PND³¹ or ULAN.³² Vektor also compiled a subject thesaurus, which indicated aspects of art practices important to local communities; these included definitions of curatorial strategies and practices, and socially motivated art practices.

After the end of the Vektor project, European-art.net,³³ an engine for searching art archives, was developed by several former Vektor partners. European-art.net aims for 'presentation of the results of database searches in various databases through one web address, and the special focus on the problems of Eastern European contents and structures (diacritics in names and many offline databases)'. Data from offline databases is imported and these are accompanied by a link which refers to the original database. The resource is also designed to function well in the wider terrain of web search engines such as Google. Another European project which found solutions to the issues of different languages and cataloguing structures is the Virtuelle Katalog Kunstgeschichte (VKK), which is a specialised, multilingual, art bibliographic search



European-art.net, entry for an artist (Josephine Pryde).

© basis wien

works or practices which can be variable, such as performance and installation, or which are not discrete entities, such as context-specific works or digital works playing on the internet. If digital recordings are made which are representations of these, they can be catalogued as digital objects. When mediation or reception is part of the form of the work, or when the technical programs or languages used become obsolete, preserving them in archives becomes difficult and the knowledge they create may disappear. These were some of the problems addressed in 'Art in Variable Media' and CIAO, large-scale consortial projects led by Berkeley³⁷ dealing with access to art collections. The

engine. This uses CGI script to search the contents of members' databases. Because the subject indexing is not consistent between the library catalogues it searches in Germany and Italy, the VKK solution was to have no separate subject search, but a combined title, keyword and subject search field.³⁴ Links are provided to the separate catalogues so that more detailed searches can be carried out in those.

A number of digital object management products have recently become available, in which digital representations of physical documents or objects, or original digital files, can be displayed and linked to the catalogue entries. One project using such a product was the UK Digttool Project,³⁵ which used the Ex Libris Digttool software and Dublin Core metadata to store and access text, image and sound files from digital repositories. This software incorporated image retrieval software and full-text searching of the digital document itself, rather than just its catalogue record, as well as hierarchical management, in which lower-level objects (such as a video-clip) can inherit data elements from higher-level objects (such as databases). All of these are useful features for cataloguing ephemera. As digital object management systems begin to be used by libraries, particularly in connection with institutional repositories,³⁶ it will be possible to employ them to catalogue both digitised ephemera and electronic art ephemera.

Integration of art and its documentation

Some of the key forms of contemporary art are

technical problems of long-term digital curation apply also to digital ephemera produced as documentation of such work, which will provide evidence of the work. When cataloguing digital objects, the catalogue must include one set of the kind of information that the works have in common with other art works, such as a creator, title, format, etc., and another technical set, recording what has been done to the work. The article discusses how these sets of metadata are managed. In the *Conceptual and Intermedia Arts Online* (CIAO)³⁸ project, material was catalogued in which the documentation or representation of work for the archive and the work itself might be indistinguishable, both conceptually and in format. The catalogue was used to create relationships between parts or groups of material in different media using a hierarchical structure based on Encoded Archival Description, and this principle can be applied when we catalogue digital ephemera, or ephemera related to recordings of art practice. Artworks, documentation of art and administration may be interrelated and the catalogue can be used to make those relationships evident, using FRBR³⁹ structures to catalogue items in context.

Conclusions

Many contemporary artists and art researchers are mobile, and the issues they deal with matter across geographical borders, as art works and practices cross media and disciplines. As libraries we need to

communicate in the same way across such borders, of curating, archiving, librarianship, so that our users can find the information they are looking for. The boundaries between different formal systems and conventions are explored in the various projects that are evolving, whilst technological innovations make it possible for our catalogues to be more flexible. Both standard catalogues and online databases are desirable for different reasons; catalogues and standards are reliable and authoritative and existing networks are widely used internationally, whereas web portals are relatively quickly produced and can hold information about files in collections that do not produce traditional library catalogues, and can also be used to highlight subjects or to publicise materials to particular audiences. These are both ways in which particular, local, content present in ephemera can be catalogued in such a way that information about it can be re-used and widely retrieved, as a mass of fragmentary information is joined together to represent ephemera visually and textually. Such projects can be understood as making, as well as documenting, histories that would otherwise disappear.

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