

3. Art ephemera: citation, marginalia, mimicry, mockery, fakes and tailpieces

Introduction

Crucially for this research, the inter-relationship of the terms of art and the terms of its place in the world are documented in ephemera. Ephemera are used to communicate (often using citation) and circulate (as art does); it is both text and object. It functions as publicity material and documentation of art that is not object-based, and also as shabbily auratic 'art ephemera'. I am concerned in this chapter with the textual and visual content of manifestations of art ephemera (a cultural level, in which they are related chiefly to visual art and to its discourses). I consider the question:

- How have artists used ephemera to represent, or contextualise aspects of art practice?

I begin by considering the particular qualities of contemporary art ephemera in terms of communication and circulation. These qualities are part of the expression of the entity and cannot be separated from my reading of the content of the particular manifestation, at the level of interpretation and which I read, with reference to Derrida, as citation¹. Art ephemera may have brief and conventional content, or they may be very condensed sources of information, citing both from visual art and from print traditions. The visual and textual strategies used in contemporary art ephemera often relate to the event and to social and political intentions of the participants, as I will show in this chapter. I identify the following particular qualities of art ephemera: Ephemerality, Directness,

Communication, Marginalia, Information and Knowledge, Fragmentation and Plurality,

¹ See Derrida (1988). In the second part of this essay, Derrida reads Austin's *How to do things with words*: by citing Derrida, I indicate that I do not interpret ephemera as 'performative' but as documents that cite.

the Quotidian and Egalitarian, and Citation (mimicry, mockery, fakes and tailpieces). Through interpreting manifestations of art practice documented in ephemera, I continue to develop the idea of a **complex notion of ‘alternative’** related to the production of a ‘critical space’.

Art ephemera as documentation of alternative spaces

Naomi Siderfin in the introduction to *Occupational Hazard* warns that as history depends on documentation (she cites talk and published writing) “To subscribe to the claim that the ‘alternative’ has now, paradoxically, become the mainstream, is to ignore actual dissenting practice by not reporting it”. (McCorquodale, Siderfin & Stallabrass, 1998, 41). Julie Ault comments that documentation of ephemeral events and items from the paper trails of short-lived groups are least likely to be found in library collections. and she comments on the value of such items, reproduced in Ault (2002a):

Reprinted for both their textual and visual contents, selected documents from the paper trails of defunct groups – flyers, communiqués, and press releases – are reproduced here as they were initially circulated to convey the visual strategies of the times when they were made. (Ault, 2002, 12).

The artists and others involved in organising art events in London in the 1990s produced documentation of the kind described by Ault. Some of the ephemera they produced have found their way into libraries in my collection and others.² A vast supplementary and fragmented source of documentation of London’s alternative and transient galleries may be contained within collections of ephemera in major art libraries, but often access is difficult and circulation restricted. This research addresses this problem.

² I review library collections of contemporary art ephemera in chapter 6, and list collections in Appendix 2

Particular qualities of art ephemera

Ephemera are ostensibly the ‘minor transient documents of everyday life’ (Twyman., 7). Michael Twyman points out, however, that the shortcomings of this definition are admitted, amongst ephemera collectors “not every item of ephemera can be regarded as minor or even transient”. Looking at a collection of contemporary art ephemera, it can be seen that they may have negligible content, or they may be very condensed, elaborate sources of information. The contradictory qualities of ephemera, their potentially disproportionate importance, is one reason for their appeal as objects to collect, another is their vulnerability; they are not made to last, another their limited circulation, their rarity.

Ephemerality

Art ephemera are a relatively unexplored resource and the existing articles on them often begin with an explanation of the term. Following this convention, I cite the definition from *The Encyclopaedia of ephemera: fragmentary documents of everyday life* (Rickards, 2000), because it provides both a traditional definition of ephemera and comments on its limitations and attractive qualities³. The definition is given by Michael Twyman in his editor’s introduction:

Ephemera is the plural form of the Greek word *epheMERON* (*epi* = on, about, round; *hemera* = day). Literally, it refers to something that lasts through the day, which is the case with some winged insects. The word *epheMERIS* has long been used in titles of Greek newspapers and *epheMERIDES* describe a category of document (calendar, diary, etc.). Among several definitions of ephemera that Maurice Rickards proposed, the one that has gained widest currency is the ‘minor transient documents of everyday life’ (Twyman, 7).

Twyman points out that the shortcomings of this definition are admitted, amongst ephemera collectors:

³ Maurice Rickards’ collection of ephemera is now at the Centre for Ephemera Studies, Reading University.

[N]ot every item of ephemera can be regarded as minor or even transient” and postulates that: a “particular directness” as a historical source, due to their production at the time, by participants, and its fascination for the collector, together raise the matter of “the need for ephemera to be catalogued and studied with something of the rigour applied to other kinds of documents. (7).

As I argued in chapter 2, it is not ephemerality that indicates the contemporariness.

Adorno’s “radical temporality” is based on the viability of an historical avant-garde, an ‘alternative’ presented in time, new or different, whereas my understanding of ‘alternative space’, following Lefebvre, is of space produced by a different consciousness, in which long-term historical affiliations may be important. In my thesis, the complex ‘alternative space’ is a space in which it is possible to continue to oppose, or to have a dialogue with predominant conditions.

Art ephemera are especially valuable because they document events and structures which are also ephemeral, the kind of events happening daily, which form a large part of the art world, but which are often not commented on, or written into published histories. Such events and institutions may later on come to be considered as significant, or as failures, “vanished paths” (Bonotto, 2000).

Directness

Ephemera are recognised as having a “particular directness” (Twyman, 7) as a historical source, due to their production at the time of events, by participants. In this chapter, I will show what that “directness” consists of: to see what kind of events they were produced for, by what kinds of institutions, how they relate to the event, what visual and textual strategies they use and how these work together, what social and political processes they refer to, if any.

Communication, distribution and circulation

Ephemera are usually intended to be useful for a short time, and it is this usefulness that is literally ephemeral, rather than the items themselves, as these often become souvenirs, or are intended as documentation. They may be used by the artist as an art form or to provide a context for the art and may be used, therefore, to assert artists' professional authority on art, what it is, its place and its role. In the introduction to *The Life/live* exhibition catalogue from 1996, which contains the most complete survey to date of artist-run spaces in London in the 1990's, 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 (Pagé, 1996, 8). Art ephemera are usually freely or cheaply distributed and this distribution is usually directly from the gallery or artist to the recipient, they are available in the context of an event, unlike publications, which are 'broadcast', ephemera are usually 'narrowcast'; sent in the post, picked up at the event, or given by hand. This method of circulation and the lists of participants they carry make them potentially an index of the sociability of the art world; cross-referencing people named in ephemera and those it is sent to maps the networks of social contacts comprising it. This network is 'managed' for different purposes, sometimes to reach a wide audience for the work, sometimes to reach potential purchasers, sometimes to create a network for the exchange of information, sometimes to create an 'alternative' informational space. Art ephemera itself is used as a 'critical space', in which to 'set the scene' for, or provide the context for, the event. As Ault comments, "These images, which are all emblematic of social processes and temporal activities, rarely circulate after their initial flash" (Ault, 2002b, 11): to facilitate circulation, by giving access in libraries, by making the catalogue represent them better,

is my aim.

Marginalia



Marginal and
 fragmentary
 as they are,
 the examples
 I use in this
 essay refer
 to, or cite
 from, a wide
 spectrum of
 sources. In
 the following
 example, a
 poster by
 Bank,

Figure 1:
 Bank 'Mask
 of Gold',
 1997, poster

which
 announces

the show 'Mask of Gold', the text is a rant, rather than an invitation, on art's context. The margins here are a kind of alternative space, in which art ephemera cite rather than perform.

An ephemeron may be used comment on art's context, it may be made in the style of an art-work, it may be art or it may document conceptual or non-object-based art practices and one of the ways that it may do this, is by being made to refer to its own quality of being marginalia. As marginalia of art, ephemera may comment on, or subvert, the main text. Art ephemera may also include items that are intended to be the main text, or, as here, to make the marginal into the main text. The relationship of the marginal to the mainstream institutions of art, referred to in this example is important, and I return to it in chapter 4.

Carriers of information

Because it is made in advance of an occasion, an ephemeron may be a record, evidence that something existed. As a record of an event, art ephemera may contain information about the date and duration, names of people involved and their roles, the place of the event, sponsors' and funders' names and logos and the words used to describe their involvement. The contents of small publications in contrast tend to be expositive, to set out and explain intentions or a position, as manifestos, for example, do. Press releases and more elaborate kinds of art ephemera, such as tickets, programmes and posters use both styles of communication. Ephemera often contain information, as writing or as images, in a condensed format that is standardised by the conventions of the medium. However, information with a longer currency and more literary construction quite frequently accompanies the ephemeral announcements, for example statements of intentions on the opening of a new gallery. The expressive form of ephemera itself, as information or knowledge, is sometimes used reflexively, a complex trope. Ephemera are used intentionally to give information about the context of an event, in contrast to the implicit effect of contextualisation that comes from their form and distribution.

Sometimes the work itself is concerned with tactical use of informational forms, art ephemera itself is used as a ‘critical space’ as I will explain in chapters 4 and 5.

Fragmentation and plurality

As evidence of the art world, ephemera are fragmentary, they carry references, and appropriations of discourses. An ephemeron shows these references as signs, words, and images.⁴ Although itself a fragmentary source, an ephemeron may be related to another, or to entities beyond the collection. In critical mass, they represent the ‘art-world’ in overwhelming detail, although this is a representation that remains partial, they are not intended to form an ‘archive’⁵. I have catalogued all the cards, flyers and press releases in my collection from the year 2000. I collected as many as I could, I have listed all the names of all the artists mentioned on the cards for both single person and group shows, so the database catalogue maps who showed where and when in London during that year, but the card collection is not complete and the art work that those artists showed is absent from the catalogue, in these and other ways there is a play between fragmentation and plurality in a collection of ephemera.

In libraries, ephemera are usually considered in their plurality, kept in files. These files are usually ‘Artist files’ and ‘Gallery files’ or Institutional files’, which clumps the information on them under certain criteria, hiding other. As I will explain in chapter 7, on

⁴ In cataloguing practices these are represented by words, by the construction of controlled symbolic language systems, (subject headings or thesauri) or ‘natural’ language. By controlling the language used to index items, consistent headings are used to make ‘critical mass’ from disparate information, see chapter 7.

⁵ See chapters 6, on archives and collections and chapter 8, for reflections on my collection as a representation.

cataloguing, one of the roles of the cataloguer is the re-contextualisation of ephemera, the construction of relationships between fragmentary sources.

Quotidian and egalitarian

Use of everyday commercial and amateur printing techniques was historically a critical strategy. Ralph Rugoff says that “the artists in *Extra art: a survey of artists’ ephemera, 1960-1999* exuberantly explore the possibilities offered by commercial printing techniques for taking art into different cultural and social spaces.” (Rugoff, 2001). This exhibition from a very substantial private collection of artists’ ephemera (specifically that created by artists) includes mail art, and Fluxus items, which used everyday objects, techniques and processes. Steven Leiber and Todd Alden curated the exhibition (shown at CCAC, San Francisco and the ICA, London). They isolated artists’ ephemera as a distinct kind of art ephemera, and in their essay in the catalogue essay they describe its value. They give an art historical survey and description of artists’ ephemera in the late 20th century and its reflection of changing art practices and understanding of art “Freely distributed, plentiful in quantity (at least initially) and consisting of degradable printed materials, artists’ ephemera has historically had little or no market value” (Leiber and Alden, 2001, 22). In a footnote to the catalogue essay they explain why they introduce the term “artists’ ephemera”: to distinguish this material from other art ephemera; they say that existing terms such as “graphic design” and “documentation”. “are too pejorative, and they inadequately express the “work like” aspect of certain printed materials – “printed matter that functions to greater or lesser degrees, in the manner of artworks.” (21) They also aim to draw attention to its democratic quality, both functionally and because it uses commercial printing and design techniques.

Citation in ephemera

At the level of interpretation, art ephemera are closely related to both art and traditional ephemera, in terms of content and references. In the *Encyclopaedia of Ephemera* (Rickards, 2000), there is no separate entry for art cards. However art cards employ some of the formats that are listed, for example: admission tickets, advertising novelties –“the eye-catching oddity” and related eccentric advertising, beer mats, leaflets (noted called flyers in America), club flyers, keepsakes, posters, trade cards (it is noted that these were often made of paper), and often incorporates a kind of citation of these formats and their conventions, through mimicry, mockery and faking.

The ephemera I have consulted is at least partly textual and intended to announce an event unambiguously, but the visual element is as important as the textual and the two can not be understood separately, whether they are created by artists or not.

Contemporary art ephemera use citations and appropriations from both art practices and traditional art ephemera. Their formats and printing techniques may be conventional, they may be, and are intended to look, for example, like a programme for an event, but parody, homage and pastiche are used to complicate, elucidate or mix the messages. Text and images may do this independently or they may reflect or react upon each other. To analyse the small grains of unique items and the larger grains of the qualities of the collection I have looked for methods of critique analogous or contiguous to those deployed in art works; such as institutional critique, urban experiences and the subjective ‘voice’. Reading the textual content I consider the use of specific discourses, literary styles such as rhetoric, polemic, hyperbole, adoption, appropriation, adaptation and

mimicry; references and cross-references. Visual strategies include mimesis, appropriation and subversion, citing of styles of design and layout.

These strategies cannot be considered innately critical; everyday techniques, for example are used for practical or stylistic reasons. In this example of the beer-mat genre ‘Text-based art space’, the item cites the beer-mat format, and also looks like a pastiche of a readymade (as critique of value of ‘auratic’ art object and as transgression).

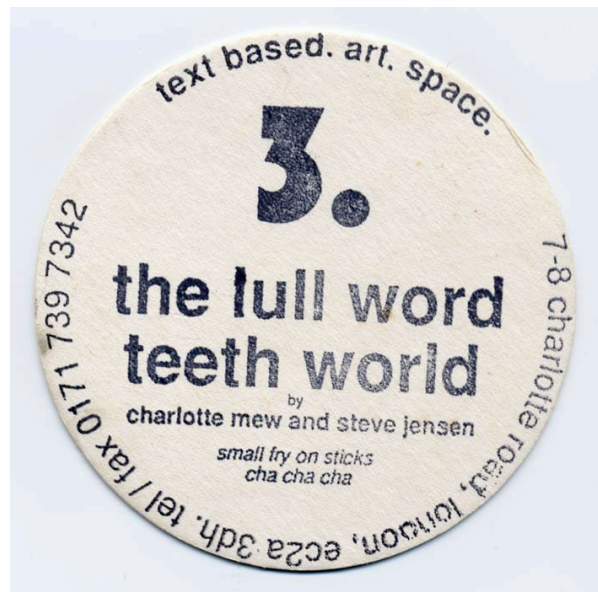


Figure 2: Text based art space, c.1999. beer mat

The ‘space’ referred to here may be the beer-mat or 7-8 Charlotte Road, London EC2A 3DH. Similarly, the use of such a tactic as ‘critique’ has been made problematic by theories of art being vulnerable to “precuperation” (Marc Augé’s term, 1999). However, as I will show, style can demonstrate historical allegiances. One kind of discourse employed in art ephemera is a naïve style of writing that has been developed and continues as a convention despite criticism of it, for example by Harris (1998). Irony and pastiche, use of ‘low’ kind of art writing and humour pervade this material, as they

tended to the art world in London at that time. The period I am discussing followed the yBa period of which James Gaywood has commented "That "yBa" is socially inactive, but employs a pastiche referring to "egalitarian" art, is problematic." (Gaywood, 1997, 3), however, it is possible that such forms are to some extent, egalitarian. Examples of specific discourses employed are the intensified sociological discourse, their “fierce sociology”, of Inventory, shown in the e-mail announcement 7th January 2004 of their showing of *Re: presentations of everyday life: recent video works* in which they describe “video making as admixtures of mythological surveyor, psychological cartographer, silent empathic observer, melancholic ethnographer and passionate enthusiast”, or their slogans, such as “Smash this puny existence”.



Figure 3: Inventory, 'Smash this puny existence', 1999, card [publication announcement]

Mimicry, mockery, fakes and tailpieces

As examples of how art ephemera can cite traditional formats and artistic styles, I show two examples here, the first a drawing by Hogarth for an exhibition catalogue, and secondly a set of contemporary art ephemera consisting of a programme, a ticket and fake currency note. Both examples employ mimicry, and play with conventions of style and content, both use the tail-end as a motif.

The first public exhibition of contemporary art in London, also the first in England, curated by artists was in the 18th century. It came about at the Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury (later Great Ormond Street Hospital) in about 1750 (Luckhurst, 1951) and (Taylor, 1999, 3). Luckhurst also researched the earliest one-man shows in London organised by artists themselves⁶, giving the reasons for these as usually in order to sell work, sometimes a realisation that they could exhibit their own work without needing a gallery, brought about by personal pique. The first instance he finds is Nathaniel Hone in a room near the top of St. Martin's Lane in 1775, followed by Gainsborough at his house in Pall Mall from 1784 until 1788 and Turner in his 'gallery' in Queen Anne St. West in 1809. Luckhurst says that admission to the 1761 Society of Artists Exhibition was by purchase of a catalogue, which served as a season ticket, and that effectively there was a charge for admission to the exhibition.

⁶ Luckhurst's primary authority is Whitley, W. T. *Art in England, 1800-1820*, 1928. He found primary sources in the archives of the Royal Academy.



Figure 4: Hogarth. Tailpiece to catalogue of Society of Artists exhibition, 1761
 The catalogue bore a frontispiece depicting Britannia watering the three arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, and this tailpiece, apparently a monkey watering old art, by Hogarth. The dead 'Exoticks' in pots are labelled 'obit 1502', 'obit 1506' and 'obit 1604'
 Luckhurst comments:

there is reason to believe that the two drawings taken together were also meant to hint at a contrast between the live and contemporary views of the artists exhibiting at Spring Gardens and the dead and academic attributes of those who were responsible for the rival show in the Strand! (Luckhurst, 1951)

Whether or not this is the case, the example is a precursor of contemporary ephemera as in it Hogarth writes and draws a comment on art's context and it is made in the style of

his art works, his satirical prints. His caricature was employed in favour of professionalism and elitism in contemporary art of that time.

The Articultural show organised by Factual Nonsense (FN) took place in 1999 outside the Festival Hall on London's south bank of the Thames, taking over a public space for the day. It was the second street market organised by FN, the first had been the Bull Market in Lexington Street the previous year. The set of ephemera from the fair is comprised of a programme, admission ticket and fake currency note, all formats included in the encyclopaedia. The programme is a traditional form of ephemera; it lays out the content and order of the proceedings and acts as a souvenir afterwards. The set comes from an artist-organised event using existing urban outdoor spaces in a way that alludes to historical types of public use of such places for celebrations. The programme lists about 50 artists who hired stalls and sold goods or services. In the evening there was a party in the Festival Hall. The set references some of these traditional formats: the programme references one for a parochial agricultural fair in its textual and image content, the fonts and layout are traditional and ornate. A pun is used for the title that describes the art and culture that will be on show at this event. The sheep is used as the central illustration, and this image is re-developed at the bottom where two sheep are shown standing with one foreleg raised, facing each other.

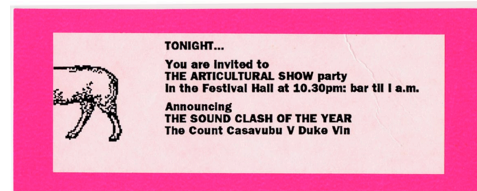
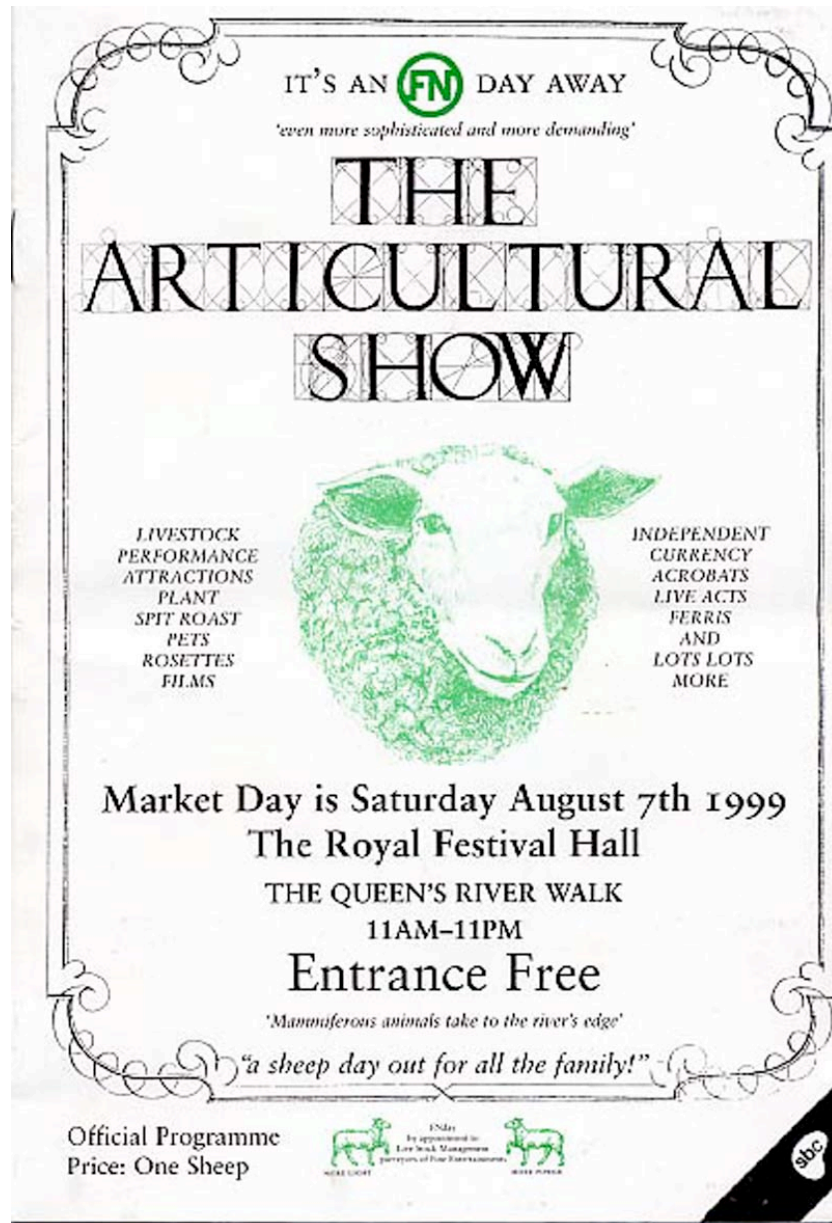


Figure 5: FN (1999 *Articultural Show*, programme, sheep currency note and ticket.

The denomination of the fake currency note is ‘One sheep’⁷. This currency was bought, or exchanged for pounds and the Sheep were then spent in the market.

The ticket for the party uses what becomes therefore the logo for the event on the printed paper containing information about the event, a ‘Sound clash between Count Casavubu v Duke Vin. Both this information, referring to Jamaican DJ’s practice and the fluorescent pink of the card the paper is stuck onto introduce cultural references randomly far from the English agricultural show. When they re-use formats such as the programme, the ticket, the fake currency note, as shown in the *Articultural fair* ephemera, ephemera function both as what they are and also as souvenirs, and documentation in the sense that this set documents ‘temporary public art’. In addition to this, citation in ephemera may be used, as in this case, to parody an institution. The use of logos and series to identify institutions and organizations is a convention of publicity material. The existence of such conventions means that these conventions can be used, creatively and critically, to comment on ‘the event’ and ‘the institution’ and to describe tactical uses of such cultural forms. This process may itself be art.

Art ephemera document events and structures which are also ephemeral, the kind of events happening daily, which form a large part of the art world, but which are often not commented on, or written into published histories. Such events and institutions may later on come to be considered as significant, or as failures, or just as a good day out.

⁷ Art works which take the form of fake currency, include Robert Watts’ One dollar, Fluxus (1962\)\ Fluxus Codex 534-5, Cildo Meireles’ alternate currency project, Zero Dollar [1978-84], Zero Cruzeiro [1974-78] and Zero Centavo [1974-78], in which he “combined the notions of counterfeiting and valuelessness into a wry meditation on the nature of money”, see (Moaquera, 1999). See also Velthuis (2005) for several other examples, from Marcel Duchamp’s Tzanck cheque of 1919 on.