

# Viewpoint:

## Ephemera: an undervalued resource in the art library

Art events can be transitory and the danger of losing all record of an exhibition, installation, performance or happening is significant. Ephemeral items are often the only existing documentation of such events. The smallest galleries rarely publish catalogues but will often generate a private view card or press release.

Art ephemera is material which has been created and conceived by an artist or the gallery representing them to publicise an exhibition or event. In the 1960s, new low-cost mass production techniques allowed galleries and artists to disseminate information with ease. For an artist, this was an opportunity to produce objects or artworks to supplement the work in the show, small enough to be sent in the post or for picking up at the event (thus the term 'extra art'). Information about art and the artwork itself became one. Galleries continue to generate the more standard publicity material – usually a single sheet or card, possibly containing some text, a list of works or an image. Other items may include button badges, stickers, posters or fliers.

Originally conceived as short lived documents, intended to last no longer than the exhibition, ephemeral materials can form a unique historical snapshot. Such items therefore contribute to the study of artists and their work, and how they are perceived in the context of the contemporary art scene. A gallery may generate a body of material which reveals the development of a particular moment in art history. For example, ephemeral items spanning the existence of Seth Siegelaub's short-lived gallery in late 1960s New York map the American branch of Conceptual art which involved artists such as Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner and Douglas Heubler. Similarly, the early days of the YBA movement in the UK are almost exclusively recorded via ephemeral items from disparate venues; for several years subsequent to the 'inaugural' YBA catalogue for the now infamous

1988 *Freeze* exhibition, artists such as Richard Patterson, Fiona Rae or Mat Collishaw feature in few publications of more than a few pages.

For libraries and archives who set out to collect ephemera, a constantly growing and difficult to control volume of material is inevitable. Institutions receive an endless supply, often with little effort on the part of the librarian. Questions arise concerning an item's relevance, what should be kept, and how it should be stored and accessed effectively. Often, access to such material is poor: it is usually uncatalogued and locating items can be dependent on the personal knowledge of the archivist or librarian.

In a library or museum context ephemera is usually stored in alphabetical 'artists' files', which are principally self-indexing. Larger institutions have undertaken cataloguing via templates to enable wider access and awareness of the material. Staffing constraints, in conjunction with the lack of importance which has historically been placed on ephemera as a research tool, usually necessitate that the cataloguing process is basic and reliant on trained volunteers. However, those who have been able to undertake such cataloguing report an increased use of their artists' files.

In addition to its research value, ephemera can be a useful promotional tool for an institution's other collections. In galleries, art historical exhibitions often feature supporting ephemeral material, providing a wider understanding of the subject being discussed. In an education environment, displays of ephemera can be a vibrant and accessible way of bringing academic subjects to life.

In recent years there has been a shift from paper ephemera towards that which is distributed electronically by email. Although the British Library is currently working on a project to archive websites, it remains to be seen if ephemeral mailouts will be preserved. For the time being, though, for those who work with it on a daily basis, discovering

countless fascinating and illuminating documents, it is encouraging that contemporary art ephemera is at last receiving the attention it deserves as a valid research resource.

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## References

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1. *Extra art: a survey of artists' ephemera, 1960-1999*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 2001. Catalogue of an exhibition curated by Steven Leiber at California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco, 12 October-8 December 2001.

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