**Art Libraries Journal**

**Printed exhibition ephemera: here to stay? A survey of UK and international art galleries and organisations, undertaken by Chelsea College of Arts Library, 2015**

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**Introduction**

The story of exhibition ephemera, and its relationship to modern and contemporary art history, is now well narrated and needs little or no introduction.[1] Chelsea College of Art's own collection of printed ephemera, like many similar collections of its type, has gone through various incarnations and phases of development. The collection was started in the 1980s by Stephen Bury, with material dating back to the 1950s. Collecting continued, particularly since the 1990s when the collection was added to more intensively. Today, all private view cards, exhibition announcements and programmes that are posted to the Library are kept and added to the collection. From time to time material is also acquired retrospectively via donation. For instance, material from Professor Norbert Lynton's own collection of artists' files was added in recent years, as well as a selection of the working files of Jasia Reichardt.

The Chelsea collection is increasingly international in scope although historically, and still today, the focus is on UK-based artists and galleries, with London particularly well represented. Material relating to group exhibitions is filed chronologically, with solo exhibitions organised alphabetically by artist. Artists with a large number of ephemeral items, or with a connection to Chelsea College of Art, are allocated an individual file. In previous years, ephemera (which at the time also included newspaper cuttings and photocopies) had been stored within the exhibition catalogues collection. However in 2005 the material was separated and ephemera was moved into hanging cabinets and files. A very useful file analysis project was undertaken in 2007, but the largest collection development activity to date took place in 2010-11: The collection was completely rehoused under preservation conditions, and mainstream newspaper clippings were weeded. Catalogue records for all individual artist files were created, and added to the library management system.

The collection in the last few years has continued to grow – and at quite a rate. An undertaking to sort and file the resulting backlog of ephemera, commencing over a year ago, was the starting point for the current research project. Indeed, it seemed to be a timely moment to be looking more closely at printed ephemera. Whilst there was (and still is) important research being done in the area of e-ephemera[2], there had also been a resurgence of interest in print. David Senior's *Please come to the show,* an exhibition and publication entirely devoted to printed ephemera – exhibited at MOMA Library in 2013 – was a case in point.[3] For library staff who look after these collections, planning for their development and facilitating their use in learning, teaching and research, it would be incredibly valuable to gain up-to date insight: in particular on the extent to which ephemera fits today into arts organisations' core activities of curating, presenting and publicising contemporary art. To this end, it

[1] Accounts are numerous. For the most detailed analysis see Lieber, Steven and Perez, Pilar *Extra art: a survey of artists' ephemera, 1960 – 1999* Smart Art Press, 2001

[2] One recent example would be the research done by Tate Library, as described in Holly Callaghan's article, 2013. Other more up-to-the-minute examples are detailed in this issue of ALJ.

[3] *Please Come to the Show* 2013 MOMA Library; Senior, David *Please come to the show* London, Occasional Papers, 2014

was decided that a survey – sent to a range of galleries and other arts organisations with an active exhibition programme – would be an appropriate next stage of the project.

Clive Phillpot made an observation in 1985, which has since been often cited in professional literature, that ephemera collections reflect the "somewhat passive accumulation" of items, which reach the collecting site "specifically through the activity of the community of art agencies that comprise the institution's unique geographic and intellectual environment".[4] Indeed, in the case of this survey too, the starting point was very much Chelsea College of Art's own network. Nearly all of the 250 organisations to which the survey was sent were from a list of organisations from whom Chelsea has purchased publications or has had other professional contact with. The results of the survey, therefore, cannot claim to be conclusive, and ideally more research would need to be done to get a more detailed picture of how organisations make use of print ephemera today. However, the results of this particular project are both surprising and plausible, and certainly worthy of further exploration: that the use of printed ephemera is not declining to anything like the extent that might be expected.

**The survey**

The survey took the form of three simple questions:
*1. Does your institution produce printed exhibition ephemera (i.e. exhibition announcements, private view cards, posters, etc.)?*
*2. If yes, does your institution distribute these items by post?*
*3. Is your policy on the above likely to change in the foreseeable future? Do you have any comments about this or about anything else to do with exhibition ephemera*?

The survey was distributed to the 250 organisations on the list. As expected given Chelsea College of Art's location, the majority of institutions that the survey was sent to, 47%, were UK-based. (There was also with a strong representation of organisations within the London area.) The USA had the next largest presence on the list at 10%, though of course given its geographic size this equates to a fairly low representation. European institutions were much better represented, in particular Germany at 8% – which is unsurprising given the very active arts publishing industry, and the number of large municipal museums as well as regional/local 'Kunstvereine' (membership-led arts associations) that also publish catalogues and monographs.  Organisations in France represented 5% of the list, and representation of other European and Nordic countries, as well as Australia and Canada, were all at less than 3% each. Only one organisation was based in Brazil, one in Mexico and one in Korea; the Americas and Asia were otherwise unrepresented, as was the Middle East. Whilst both non-commercial and commercial organisations were represented, public institutions – who tend of course to be much more active in publishing – comprised a very large majority at 73%.

The survey was sent by individual email, to a named contact within the organisation where possible. Each email subject heading contained the name of the organisation, so as to further personalise the emails and encourage responses, but also to be able to monitor replies more easily later on. Emails were sent from a generic, rather than personal, institutional email account. Six to eight weeks after first emails were sent, reminder emails were sent to organisations that had not replied. A further six to eight weeks after that, final emails were sent to remaining institutions in the hope of receiving

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[4] Phillpot, Clive "Files in the files: ephemera in the art library" *Art Documentation* Spring 1995 p.13

replies. In the end, a total of 124 organisations responded to the survey – equating to a very adequate 49% response rate, and promising some really valuable data to examine.

## Results and findings

In response to **question 1** (*Does your institution produce printed exhibition ephemera*), an overwhelming proportion of organisations – 86% of the 124 total respondents – answered 'yes', that they still produced printed ephemera. However, many respondents were helpful enough to detail exactly what printed material they produced, and in many cases it included items like lists of works, price lists and gallery plans. Taking these inclusions into consideration, the afore-mentioned 86% seems rather more explicable. Conversely, it was equally feasible that quite a number of the seventeen organisations who had answered 'no' to question 1 had only considered certain types of items (private view cards and invitations) to count as printed ephemera. It became apparent, therefore, that there was limited scope for statistical analysis of this question.

Supplementary responses that were given to question 1, however, were much more useful. In the cases where organisations were fully digital the reasons given are fairly easy to predict. Budgetary constraints were of course the primary and most widely cited motivator, combined with the ease and relative cheapness of non-print alternatives such as email and social media. Many organisations were also concerned about the environmental impact of producing printed ephemera, and several noted that decisions to cease production of print had been directly tied to increasingly 'green'-focused operational policies. A number of publicly funded organisations mentioned that reduction of environmental impact was one of many factors on which funding applications depended. It is noteworthy that many of the organisations that had ceased the production of printed exhibition ephemera had taken this decision some time ago: 2012 and 2013 were dates mentioned by several respondents.

There were several instances of organisations stating that whilst their usual policy was not to print ephemera, the production of some form of printed matter would be considered on occasions when exhibiting artists expressed a specific interest in it, budgets permitting. Very interestingly, several small to medium-sized publicly funded organisations, with internationally-recognized profiles in the curating and exhibiting of 'cutting edge' contemporary art, mentioned that policy on print/non-print was directly linked to the curatorship or directorship of the organisation. One respondent noted that policy had very recently changed as a result of a new curator in post; several respondents mentioned that directorships were fixed term and thus policies could be subject to change, in either direction, within less than three years. It is clear then, already, that decision-making on ephemera is very often about more than practical issues: ephemera is revealed as an active proponent in the intellectual 'positioning' of any given organisation.

In response to **question 2** (*If yes, does your institution distribute these items by post?*), just 29% of the total respondents said that they do not distribute any ephemera at all by post. Communication channels that were mentioned as alternatives included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Mailchimp. The other 71%, whilst not as high as the positive response rate to question 1, still represents a surprisingly high proportion of organisations choosing to rely on not only printed exhibition ephemera but its postal dissemination. Once again, though, caution is required against reading the figures too literally. For instance, some of the organisations with a general policy of distributing ephemera by digital means had nevertheless responded in the affirmative as there some occasions for which a different marketing strategy was deemed appropriate. For example, more than one publicly funded institution mentioned re-occurring prize exhibitions, and several (primarily

commercial) galleries mentioned a tiered system in which a select group of contacts would be invited via post to particular events.

Irrespective of the sector, however, the supplementary answers provided to question 2 did, in the main, corroborate the statistical data. Whilst almost all respondents noted that their digital communications had increased enormously, and that the volume of material they posted had reduced accordingly, they still preferred to disseminate a proportion of their exhibition announcements via post. Several organisations mentioned postal marketing in the region of 20-30% of total communications, which can of course still translate as a significant number. A large commercial gallery in France quoted 5000 items sent out by post, per exhibition; a public institution in Austria mentioned 4000. The smallest figure quoted was by a UK public institution: 800 items per show, a mailing list which had been reduced by half since two years ago. Alternatively, a number of organisations mentioned that they enlisted an agency to deal with distribution.

Despite the obvious costs involved in mailing out large amounts of material, is interesting to note that more than one organisation used the word "efficient" when describing the role of posted ephemera in reaching audiences. As one publicly funded gallery in the UK put it, "some people have commented that they come to the openings precisely because they receive an invite by post rather than an e-mail". Indeed, several responses revealed marketing strategies that were deliberately using print and post as a way of 'standing out' and re-enforcing a brand identity. On the other hand, there were still a significant number of respondents who felt that printed, posted material was becoming, as one UK public organisation commented, "increasingly unviable".

The data from **question 3** was particularly interesting. (*Is your policy on the above likely to change in the foreseeable future? Do you have any comments about this or about anything else to do with exhibition ephemera*?) Many of the responses provided more detailed clarification of organisations' overall positioning in relation to printed ephemera, as had been indicated in the previous two questions. Regarding the issue of whether changes in policy could be foreseen, a significant proportion of the respondents – whether they employed the use of printed, posted ephemera or not – stated that they did not envisage any changes. Perhaps this suggests that with digitisation having affected such enormous technological and cultural change, organisations have been forced to consider the issues therein for a number of years already – affording the development in some cases of highly considered standpoints one way or the other, fully embedded within organisational operation. Other respondents were less certain however, with a fairly significant number noting that any anticipated change would be in the direction of reducing print and increasing the reliance on digital communications.

A large number of respondents talked in detailed and enthusiastic terms of what was perceived as the unique and intrinsic value of printed exhibition ephemera, as opposed to digital. One respondent from a public institution in Germany concluded that whilst online is increasingly important "it does not replace" print. Another respondent from a public institution in Austria echoed these comments, noting that print "has its own quality". Several respondents mentioned the fact that printed ephemera was not only something that patrons liked to receive, but something that was a legacy record of the activity of the gallery and the artist(s). As one respondent from a publicly funded gallery in Turkey wrote, "[printed materials] become primary archival objects after the exhibitions' closing dates". Indeed, increasing numbers of galleries are recording their own activities, building archives, and using this archival material to inform the development of exhibitions. One UK regional institution mentioned that they also have a collection of ephemera on artists from the same region; several respondents mentioned that they themselves were collectors of ephemeral material. This archival

turn in contemporary art, which first made an appearance in the late 1990s, has been showing no sign of abating in the last decade and more. [5]

It also seems that the art historical legacy of the private view card is still very much alive in some quarters. A respondent from a UK regional institution, for instance, acknowledged that although they were constrained by budget in some cases, printed ephemera was produced wherever possible because it is seen as a "first work in the show". Several organisations seemed to take real pleasure in exploiting the creative possibilities of exhibition ephemera, such as the commercial gallery in Italy who for each show produce an eight-page "bulletin", conceived by the exhibiting artist. Perhaps all of this is not as surprising as it initially seems: there has, for instance, been an undisputed rise of interest within the last ten years or so in artists' publications. This is re-iterated in the comments from a regional UK public space who stated there is a certain part of the community who are still "hungry" for print material – pointing to the meteoric rise of self-publishing as another case in point. Perhaps it is this sector to whom the respondent from another UK non-commercial organisation was referring, when stating that ephemera was still deemed necessary for "very highly engaged audiences."

Interestingly, responses suggested that there was, perhaps, a perception that more organisations were fully digital than actually are (or that the survey results suggest there are). Several respondents who still used print ephemera commented in ways which suggested that they felt that theirs was a rather minority position. Similarly, the comments of those who had already ceased using print ephemera suggested that they considered their position to be the majority. This is exemplified by the respondent from the commercial gallery in the USA who noted that "print is becoming a thing of the past except for exhibition catalogues". There were some digital-only organisations that expressed a regret for the loss of print – for example the respondent from commercial gallery in the UK who talked about the "heavy heart" in taking what was largely a decision of necessity. However, generally speaking, responses from those organisations that had already gone fully digital seemed less nostalgic for print, and its potential loss, than their counterparts who had reduced print communications but not eliminated it. It was interesting to see that many of these print-reliant organisations mentioned that they were "waiting" to watch developments over the next one to two years before implementing any change in policy.


**Conclusions and questions raised**

Undertaking this survey on printed exhibition ephemera was an extremely useful research exercise. In addition to the valuable collected data, the project also offered an excellent opportunity to renew contact with arts organisations – in so doing, facilitating dialogue and exchange between the library and gallery/museum professions, and also publicising Chelsea College of Arts Library and its collections. On the back of the survey, a number of organisations donated printed ephemera to the library. A particular highlight was an extensive donation from a commercial gallery in Germany, covering group exhibitions as well as solo shows of now extremely renowned artists, from the 1980s to the present day. A display of items from the donation was curated and displayed within Chelsea library; in turn, contributing to the promotion of the ephemera collection and of the library's special collections more generally.

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[5] Cultural commentator Michael Bracewell picks up on this in his review of the Steven Lieber's *Extra Art* exhibition. Bracewell, Michael "Postcards from the edge: 'Extra Art: a Survey of Artists' Ephemera 1960-1999' *Frieze* no. 72, January/February 2003

It should be re-iterated that this study, with only 250 organisations surveyed, cannot claim to be anywhere near comprehensive; further work would need to be done in order to be more certain of findings. However, if the general results of the survey are correct – that whilst all organisations are increasingly relying on digital communications, most are still choosing to produce and distribute print ephemera – then there is a very strong case for continuing to develop and add to collections. Of course, though, this begs the question of how these growing collections can be managed. At Chelsea College of Arts, as at most institutions, space is precious. There is still some limited room for the ephemera collection to grow, but there is only so long that the current methodology of collecting in a very organic, non-selective way will work. The last collection analysis project took place at Chelsea in 2007; it is feasible that this data may at some point need to be updated, perhaps with a view to drawing up a more detailed collection development policy for ephemera and with eventual weeding of items not fitting in to that remit.[6]

To conclude, within contemporary arts discourse and practice more widely, print is definitely still here, for the foreseeable future at least. It would be naive to assume that these conditions have no bearing on the production and dissemination of printed exhibition ephemera by galleries and other arts organisations – even in this digital age. In the meantime collection managers need to be prepared for the possibility that, with holdings of ephemera continuing to expand, alongside increasing sector-wide demand to make collections more visible and accessible, decisions about their future direction may – in the medium rather than long term – need to be made.

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[6] Although over 10 years old now, Erica Dowell and Terrie L Wilson's article in the *Journal of Arts Administration* is a very fulsome discussion of collection development in relation to ephemera collections.