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## **Slipping thru the Cracks: Issues with Performing Arts Ephemera**

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*... the ephemera of today becomes the evidential data of tomorrow ...*

- John Johnson

### **Abstract**

*A critical discussion of ephemeral materials is important to historical documentation, and this issue, especially regarding performing arts ephemeral materials, has not been thoroughly treated in scholarly literature. This paper analyzes and discusses the literature that has been produced and supports the updating of the literature to address the current issues relating to the collection, documentation, access and storage of contemporary ephemera, particularly performing arts ephemeral materials. A bibliographic guide of ephemera and performing arts ephemeral materials citing relevant monographs, articles, journals and websites will be handed out for reference.*

Many articles and monographs found today on ephemera are relatively dated and few relate to the performing arts. While these older publications are still very useful, they need to be updated and the definition of "ephemera" expanded to include artefacts in addition to printed materials. My questions include the following issues. How are ephemeral materials being collected, documented and stored? Even though there are limited budgets and facilities,

should not resources be provided to performers, scholars and patrons interested in, and involved in the performing arts? The collection of ephemeral materials in printed and other formats are equally important for visual and performing artists. Theatre, dance, performance art and happenings are part of our valuable cultural heritage. Why are not more archivists and librarians taking responsibility for collecting these materials? Are there collaborations between libraries, museums and archives regarding ephemera and do they work? And finally, why not broaden the definition of ephemera commonly used in libraries to include artefacts? According to Alan Clinton,

Traditionally librarians deal with books, museum curators with artefacts, and archivists with manuscripts. Yet at the edges of what was once regarded as the proper concern of each of these are large amounts of printed paper. These materials are often designated nowadays as 'ephemera', and are generally distinguished by being difficult to arrange and to find."

Notwithstanding, ephemeral materials are being collected. Many libraries, though, are still endeavouring to provide effective methods of classification, storage and access. During the course of my research, the importance of clarifying the meaning of "ephemera" was essential to understanding that this transitory data "fills in the gaps" in art history. Today, there are so many new types of ephemeral materials that it becomes impossible to collect everything. If the vertical files or other areas where ephemera are stored are underused, one may assume that it is due primarily to the inability to access information contained within the vertical files. Instead of rewriting what is already known about the need for and issues relating to the collection, documentation, access and storage of ephemera, this study will analyse and discuss the literature that has been produced, compile the various sources into a bibliographic guide, and support the updating of the literature to address the current issues of contemporary ephemera, particularly performing arts ephemeral materials.

There are already several comprehensive monographs written on ephemera as well as articles and chapters updating various issues on the topic. Chris E. Makepeace is especially thorough, and illustrative chapters such as Nik Pollard's from Phillip Pacey's book in 1977 discuss all aspects of printed ephemera. While the British are more aware of the value of ephemera and its issues, even creating a Centre for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading in England, North America is quickly realizing their potential research and historical value. However, performing arts ephemeral materials are especially transitory in nature and present additional difficulties. Theatre, dance and performance art shows are unique because usually only ephemera such as flyers, posters, leaflets, tickets, playbills are left behind as documentation of that particular event. However, in addition to collecting this ephemera as a physical record of a performance, there has been a movement to document these performances on film and video then transferring them to digital media to prevent them from being orphaned technologically. Jayne Wark notes that there are two 'main categories' of difficulties relating to problem of ephemerality. First is the ephemeral nature of the work which 'includes not only performance art, but also conceptual art propositions where the documentation may be the work, the images and postcards circulated through the mail-art network, installation and site-specific art, and fragile video tape in obsolete formats. Second 'is the ephemeral nature of the artist-run community' in which galleries come and go sometimes not leaving very much behind. As of today, the literature of ephemera, that which is comprehensive in scope is now outdated and those which are contemporary works focus on more thematic topics, such as collecting Victorian postcards or specific topics such as access

and digitisation of ephemera. These articles and monographs written on ephemera need to be updated and gathered into a comprehensive body of work. While time consuming, ideally an updated resource of collected materials would answer or at least attempt to answer, many of the same questions on collecting, documenting, storing and preserving ephemera that have been asked time and time again since the 1960's.

## **Ephemera Defined**

There are many definitions of “ephemera,” primarily stemming from the type to be collected and the life span of the material. Over the years various authors and organizations have defined the term, expanding on earlier definitions or redefining parameters of the concept. Each of the various definitions illustrate the ongoing attempt to adequately provide an encompassing definition of the term 'ephemera' and advance the general understanding of the term. At the most basic level, the Oxford English Dictionary defines *ephemera* as: “lasting only for a day” and “one who or something which has a transitory existence.” Using this as a starting point for developing definitions of ephemera, the earliest definition of the term in relation to printed materials was from a 1971 report, *National provision of ephemera in the social sciences*, by John Pemberton. He defined ephemera as, “documents which have been produced in connection with a particular event or item of current interest and which are not intended to survive the topicality of their message.” Maurice Rickards, the founder of the Ephemera Society in the United Kingdom in 1975 (the Ephemera Society of America was started five years later in 1980) and whose collection of ephemera was a founding collection at the Centre for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading in England defined the term:

ephemera is a ‘fragment of social history...a reflection of the spirit of its time...which is not expected to survive, but which can prove to be very useful in research. ... Ephemera, represents the other half of history: the half without guile. When people put up monuments published official war histories they had a constant eye on their audience and their history would be adjusted to suit, whereas ephemera was never expected to survive-it would normally have been thrown straight away-so that it contains all sorts of human qualities which would otherwise be edited out...Who is to say that what is printed today and discarded tomorrow by the majority of people will not fulfill some important role in historical research in the future.

Throughout the subsequent years, other scholars attempted to define the term; however, they simply built upon and reworded Rickards original definition restating that “ephemera” was the transient paper material that was never intended to be kept. Then, in 1985, Chris Makepeace synthesized all of these definitions on ephemera when he said the following:

Ephemera is the collective name given to material which carries a verbal or illustrative message and is produced either by printing or illustrative processes, but not in the standard book, pamphlet or periodical format. It has the following characteristics: a) it is usually flimsy or insubstantial; b) it is a transient document produced for a specific purpose and not intended to survive the topicality of its message or event to which it relates. c) its acquisition, storage, classification and cataloguing may not fall within the conventionally accepted methods of treatment within libraries and record offices and

consequently, may require special consideration. It is, however, classifiable; d) its availability will depend on where it was produced, by whom and for what purpose and where it is available from; e) it can be either primary or secondary source material.

Each of these definitions is accurate and substantial; however, I would extend these definitions to include more aspects of the ephemerality of the performing arts, video and web-based materials to make them more applicable to today's society. As is apparent from the redefining of the definition of ephemera over the years since the 1970s, based on recent research, a new definition should be created to reflect the currency of the times and which is less restrictive than using 'print' as a modifier.

### **Performing Arts Ephemera & new mediums of ephemera: collecting the ephemeral**

“Collecting and preserving heritage materials across the broad spectrum of the performing arts on a national scale is a daunting task. Much of the material is as ephemeral and as transitory as the theatrical experience itself.” Richard Stone best states the basis for the ephemera and ephemerality of the performing arts,

There is close relationship between the transitory nature of the performing arts experience and the ephemeral nature of much of the printed material generated by the performing arts industry. Ephemera, is a genre of heritage material that is very vulnerable, but it is even more so in the performing arts where its life span is clearly defined by the duration of a production.

These aspects of performing art ephemera add an extra dimension to the very nature of ephemera by being inherently ephemeral itself. Moreover, the users of these collections need to have access to the variety of primary resources that this type of documentation provides.

As for new mediums of ephemera, which expand upon the past definitions because of the technologies and methods of communications in the 20th and 21st centuries, the mediums of video and film should be included as ephemera. For example, the Theatre on Film Archives at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts illustrates another method of collecting and preserving theatre performances, each of which are ephemeral in nature, by videotaping carefully chosen productions in New York.

The ephemera of the performing arts and new mediums such as film and video present an additional challenge for librarians. The user's need for primary sources for research, and with such ephemeral industries as theatre and dance leaning toward video to preserve the documentary history of performances, increases the desirability for the collection of printed and other ephemeral materials as complimentary sources of information.

### **Access and Classification Issues with Ephemera**

One of the most significant concerns involving ephemera is finding ways to provide access to the collection and ways to classify the ephemera within the collection. While it is time consuming and problematic, it is recommended by Romaine Ahlstrom, Brigitte J. Kueppers, and Helene G. Mochedlover that ephemera be catalogued in full level MARC cataloguing and be done at the time of receiving the collection to provide access and prevent

backlogs. Within such specialized fields as the visual arts and performing arts, a thematic approach to classification with further division into content, format and function would be best for providing access to the materials. Summarizing their ideas for cataloguing in the MARC format: the five fields that would be the most helpful and valuable to the user are: the <100> tag which is the creator field; the <200> tag which is the title of the collection field; the <520> note field; and the <600> and <700> added entry fields. If a collection of ephemera has been catalogued, either in full MARC or at a basic description level, access to the material through indexes, inventories and finding aids whether in print format or in online databases such as d-base, Access, or Pro-Cite would enhance the librarian's and users' ability to find the materials which they are searching for within a collection.

In addition to print methods of access to ephemera collections, there is a trend toward digitising these fugitive materials. In Terrie Wilson and Erika Dowell's article, *Today's ephemera, tomorrow's historical documentation: access options for artist files*, they note that "options for providing access to artists files range from simple web-based lists to collection-level cataloguing or digitisation projects." With the increase of digitisation projects, it would provide easier access to the materials as long as the "data stored on current media in a format that can be easily exported will simplify any current or future access initiative." Another suggestion for providing access and classification to ephemera is the Ephemera 21 project initiated by the Centre for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading in England. This project was initiated to "provide a facility that will allow private individuals to contribute information and images." This database will be stored and maintained at the Centre for Ephemera Studies. This digitisation project also will provide access to digital images of ephemera from the Rickards Collection and be classified in a thematic and subject access method for ease of use. While digitising ephemera collections is one method of providing access in addition to indexes and finding aids, it is still important to maintain the print collection. Digitisation is not a substitute for the original document, merely a form of and control for access. Classification and provision of access to the materials are two of the most important aspects of dealing with ephemera because if these materials cannot be found, they cannot be used.

### **The value of ephemera--the "why" of collecting and documenting**

A reoccurring theme among all the literature reviewed for this project emphasized the importance of collecting an indiscriminate and wide variety of ephemeral materials for a library collection in order to provide a complete overview because of the impossibility of knowing or predicting what will be of interest to the library user in the future. Another point that was frequently made was the advisability of collecting contemporary ephemera at the time of production, rather than waiting until later to acquire it when it is more difficult to find or may have to be expensively purchased from a specialized collector. One of the most valuable roles that ephemera can play in providing a visual context for understanding the various aspects of a time period is to be used as a basic reference tool and as a source of primary materials. One of the most relevant and persuasive arguments for the value and importance of collecting and documenting ephemera is the one made by Susan Wyngaard:

The role of ephemera in the art library is still in the early stages of recognition. Art librarians are beginning to call attention to the ephemeral, fugitive items that pass through our society documenting the taste of the time and presenting potential keys to understanding the visual history of our century. ... Ephemeral items can provide a record

of the production of visual artefacts. They note the best of the artistic rhythm to which a particular culture or society moves. A collection of well-chosen ephemeral items can present future researchers with a representative selection of the art and design environment of a particular period. These collections are important both to art historians, who attempt to reach an accurate appraisal of an era, and to practicing artists and designers who want to better understand and examine recent traditions.

Even though the collection of ephemera is full of problematic issues, especially in collecting and documenting the items, the ultimate value in providing physical examples of historical documentation for art historians, designers, artists, students, and researchers is incalculable. The opportunity to see items from everyday life, performances, and temporary exhibits adds substance to their research value and provides insight into and perspective on the period that is being explored for papers, books and design ideas.

The cataloguing and digitisation project, in which I am involved as assistant archive cataloguer at the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, is part of a three year grant project funded by the Resource Enhancement Scheme from the Arts and Humanities Research Board in conjunction with Dr. Sophie Nield at Roehampton University, our director; Richard Mangan, administrator of the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection; and the Jerwood Library of Performing Arts at Trinity College of Music in London to create a full-text searchable, item-level online catalogue for the 1750 sub-collections at the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection. The part of the project in which I am involved is to catalogue 6000 items from the pre-1890 London theatre collection and to create a digital media archive of 2000 images of those pieces of ephemera; the other part, headed by the project's director, Dr. Sophie Nield, promotes scholarly research using this collection. Since joining the project, I have had the opportunity of experiencing firsthand some of the efforts and discovering the challenges faced by libraries and archives in collecting, documenting and providing access to performing arts ephemera. For example, the collection, started in 1939 by the actors Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson and still acquires materials such as books, programmes, playbills, and so on today, is entirely uncatalogued, well, actually, the collection's 'catalogue' is all in the administrator, Richard Mangan's head. Recognising that the collection needed to be catalogued in order to have a physical record for future use, the current project developed to provide a measure of intellectual control over the collection and to provide more public access. Using the SIRSI Unicorn Workflows system, each item is catalogued at the item level this inevitably leads to many discussions on how to describe ephemera, while time consuming, it's necessary for there to be some level of standardisation in the descriptive cataloguing. Of the 6000 items that are catalogued, 2000 of them will be digitised, so every second or third one is marked for digitisation based upon certain agreed upon guidelines, i.e. no items that are too damaged; too large or a photocopy, and sent to the digitisation company, Higher Education Digitisation Service outside of London. At the end of the project in January 2006, it is the hope that there will be more funding to continue the cataloguing and digitisation of the collection and the importance of this project in providing the collection some intellectual control and the public more and easier access to the collection's materials.

### **Conclusion--the literature on ephemera and the need for a comprehensive update**

In discussing the value of collecting and documenting ephemera, another consequence

is the need for a comprehensive and updated monograph on the topic, especially incorporating the new types of ephemera as well as the potential for digitising items and accessing them through online databases and/or finding aids. Many of the contemporary literature discussions on ephemera have been topic specific and primarily found in articles, journals or book chapters while the most comprehensive discussions on ephemera have been in monographs from the 1980's. Additionally, there is a great need for research into the field of performing arts ephemeral materials. This literature would be most useful if it were to address the fact that performance and artefacts are also valuable pieces of ephemera that need to be documented for future scholarly research. With our society being in a state of information overload, the amount of contemporary ephemera that is being produced is phenomenal. Even though it might not be possible to collect everything, there should be an attempt to create a representative collection that is fully indexed and catalogued for access and use. The responsibility of libraries and archives to the collection of ephemera, especially that of ephemeral works within the performing arts, provides an invaluable resource for the future researcher. A comprehensive monograph is needed to address the issues that have been discussed over the last twenty years, providing answers, and resolving the issues involved with the collection of ephemera today.

### **Quotations:**

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