AN EPHEMERAL PRACTICE

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 1]

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses my recent and ongoing interest in ephemerality. I will primarily discuss my project, S[h/c]attered Shards of Experience: Ephemera 1-n, a series of one-of-a-kind scores (henceforth interchangeable with Ephemera) sent to friends through the postal service. The ephemera-project explores a number of artistic questions including the role of impermanency, materiality, interpersonal relationships, dissemination, the commodification of art, and the social and political efficacy of an artwork. Throughout this presentation I will a) briefly provide a framework for understanding ephemerality, b) posit a number of questions related to the project’s artistic concerns, and c) propose some tentative answers to the questions raised, with brief interludes of models found in other artistic practices important in shaping the direction of this project.

Throughout the presentation I will demonstrate, using a ‘mock Ephemera’, one instance of the way in which an enactment of performance effects the materiality of an Ephemera.

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 2]

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ephemerality within the frame of this project is to be understood as a malleable concept for the creation of work. Here I suggest a definition of ephemerality proposed by Brian Chappell “ephemeral means a short existence in terms of our expectations and the intentions of the
designers”.¹ Chappell’s short definition invites a multiplicity of understandings of how ephemerality may be manifest in the context of this project.²

Before proceeding any further, I want to quickly note that I will not attempt to provide any answers today regarding the project’s function, intentionality, or end-game, but will rather attempt to establish an open-ended framework, allowing for each person to come to their own conclusions regarding the project’s function, intentionality, and utility.

[A COLLECTION OF THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING EPHEMERALITY]

• How does the score production and material construction of Ephemera embody concerns of ephemerality?
• Is there a difference between objects designed to be impermanent and objects designed to be permanent?
• Are all objects ephemeral?
• What are the ramifications of an artistic practice that embraces impermanency?
• How does a work’s lifespan or history play into the project?
• What are the political or social implications of a project that compresses its work’s lifespan?
• What role does documentation serve?
• What are the complications of documenting ephemeral artwork?
• Can reproduction post-dissemination be controlled?
• What role can electronic modes of presentation serve?
• Does public presentation of Ephemera transgress the privacy of personal communications?
• In what context is it appropriate to discuss this work?
• Do particular contexts diminish the efficacy of the work?
• What place does ambiguity and obfuscation have within the context of this project?

[A COLLECTION OF THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING EPHEMERALITY – 4]

• What function does notation serve?
• What are the performance protocols for Ephemera?
• Who takes ownership over Ephemera?
• What is the function of textual commentary and contextualization for this project?
• How do transmissive networks and types of dissemination enforce or diminish

² A handout has been provided in order to illustrate different ways in which ephemerality is manifest in my work (see appendix A).
ephemerality?
• What are my personal motivations for pursuing this interest in ephemerality?
• Where does this work situate itself within the landscape of musical practices?

SOME TENATIVE ANSWERS (OR NON-ANSWERS) TO QUESTIONS RAISED

[Score production/material construction & the location of ephemerality]
Different combinations of materiality may have direct results on the permanency or impermanency of Ephemera. It is often through performative enactment that the ephemeral nature of an Ephemera’s material construction is brought to the foreground. Subsequent Ephemera tend to cumulatively build on previously explored aspects of ephemerality.

[Lifespan/history]
Increasingly, an Ephemera’s lifespan is eradicated alongside performative enactment.

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 5]

[Political/social implications of a compressed history]
The ever-increasing ephemerality of each Ephemera’s material construction, could be said to re-enforce western culture’s social tendency to discard an object once is has fulfilled its function. Perhaps it could be said that Ephemera play into capitalistic notions of commodity…

[Reproduction post-dissemination]
Ephemera are (partially) resistant to reproduction; they are singular. Ephemera may be possible to reproduce. Performances are not intended to be documented. This is entirely out of my control.
Except for photographic documentation, the project largely eschews the use of electronic mediums. Reasons for this avoidance are related to the ease with which material is disseminated through electronic mediums; the ease of reproduction afforded by electronic mediums; and a personally perceived detachment associated with electronic correspondence.

Ray Johnson, an American artist commonly considered the father of Mail-Art, was concerned with removing the hierarchical structures of art imposed by museums and making art that was “experience-bound,” striving to create art that “…explored spontaneity and mobility as an extension of everyday experience.” Johnson was accepting of the fact that his art may be considered a “throwaway gesture,” that forfeits fame and posterity. For Johnson, the use of the postal service as a means of disseminating his art was in an attempt to create meaningful personal interactions through a communication service that, during Johnson’s time, was seen to be “…a longstanding institution of impersonal sendings and

---


4 Gangadharan, “Mail Art,” 287.


receivings." There is a real sense of playfulness here in Johnson’s injection of life and joviality into an otherwise stale means of dissemination that I find quite striking. I wonder if at some point during this series, there may be room for similar types of playfulness in my work through the use of electronic communication?

[JENNIFER WALSHE – USE OF ELECTRONIC DISSEMINATION]

A recent project by Composer Jennifer Walshe, THMOTES, manages to make use of electronic dissemination in an equally playful way. Participants receive a text-score via the smartphone application, Snapchat. Snapchat displays text-scores between one-to-ten seconds and once that duration has elapsed, the text-score is wiped away from both the recipient’s phone and Snapchat’s server. Here, Chappell’s definition of ephemerality is useful in understanding this project’s exemplification of ephemerality due to our expectations of permanence relative to electronic mediums (assuming of course we accept that electronic mediums reduce the affordance of impermanency). Maybe worth noting here is that although one intention of the project is that the text-scores become fleeting objects of correspondences, it is still within the recipient’s capacity to take a screen shot of the text-score, rendering the communication no longer ephemeral. I often wonder if it is possible to construct a purely ephemeral artistic practice…?

[Function of documentation]

Photographic documentation may be:

• a way of partially sharing

• a catalyst for conversation

Photographic documentation may not be:

---

7 Norie Neumark, “Introduction: Relays, Delays and Distance,” in At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet, ed. Anmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
• a mechanism for personal, political, or social gain.
• an artwork onto its own rights
• presented in glossy, high definition prints
• entirely legible

[KUNDERA – DANCERS]

The project attempts to reject ‘dancer-like’ (a la Milan Kundera) qualities. It does not purposefully aim to reach a large invisible audience.

[A brief extract from Kundera’s short novel, *Slowness*]

Pontevin speaking: “…I’m nothing like the dancer, I think it not only possible but probable that a true dancer, a Berck, a Duberques, would in the presence of a woman be devoid of any desire to show off and seduce. It would never occur to him to tell a story about the typist he’d dragged by the hair to his bed because he has got her mixed up with someone else. Because the audience he’s looking to seduce is not a few specific and visible women, it’s the great throng of invisible people!”

With this conception of ‘the dancer’ (an exuberant and extroverted character, aiming to “beam forth his self” to “an invisible audience”) in mind, I would like to offer that the documentation of this series is not meant to function as a means of self-promotion, or a means of elevating my own status within musical or artistic communities (i.e.: the documentation does not aim to net revenue, merit, or acclaim; but is rather a mechanism for sharing, with specific people, work that I am concerned with (with hopes that through sharing, others may reconsider the function of musical dissemination and social implications

---

of an artwork prone to impermanency).

I have yet to find a way of actually ‘sharing’ and ‘talking’ about this project that manages to avoids coming across as facilitating my own self-promotion.

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 7]

[ANDY GOLDSWORTHY – DOCUMENTATION]

The function of the documentation related to my project is, for me, different from the types of documentation employed by a number of other artists working with fugitive-media(s). In particular, I am interested in the glossy and high quality photographic documentation used by British Land-Artist, Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy’s work, or rather his photographic documentation by virtue of quality and ease of accessibility, becomes an artwork unto its own right. It serves as the mechanism through which he attains social status amongst an artistic community. In an effort to circumvent this issue of representation within my own practice, I have made an effort to keep my photographic documentation minimal, matter of fact, and restricted to only those interested. Documentation is used as a contextualizing mechanism to provoke further conversation. Is there any reason why, allowing that Goldsworthy’s work is actually concerned with the fleeting nature of ephemerality, letting the work be truly ephemeral is not permissible? To simply let passers-by stumble upon the work both during
and/or after the act of creation? The same questions can surely be asked of my own project.  

[Willful ambiguity/obfuscation]

The notations used for Ephemera are largely arbitrary and inconsequential; often the byproduct of a quick and fleeting compositional or physical gesture.

Ephemera are willfully ambiguous regarding:

• symbology used
• performance contexts
• and/or requirements of performance
  o If instructions are provided, they are usually contradictory or nonsensical.

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE Mock EPHEMERA – 8]

[WILLEM BOSHOFF]

Willem Boshoff’s work, in particular, Writing in the Sand, has had considerable resonance with me in relation to this project’s concerns with ambiguity. The work exemplifies an interesting consequence of willful ambiguity and obfuscation (or perhaps anti-communication) as a way of engendering social engagement. Like much of the work touched upon in this presentation, Writing in the Sand, makes use of

---

9 For a sampling of artists that, for me, approach their artistic practice with minimal-to-no desire to tidily wrap-up their work into easily consumable products, please see American Composer, Edward Coffey’s, “The Gentle Guerrilla: Composing Transmission in the Performing Arts.”
fugitive media(s) in its material construction. The work is presented as an installation of stenciled words in both black and white sand positioned on the venue’s floor, and smudged or wiped away during and post-presentation. The words outlined in black sand indicate a ‘marginalized’ North-African language/dialect. The first word outlined in white sand, following the indication of North-African dialect, is an archaic English word, rendering their meaning unclear to many English-speaking viewers, with the following words providing a definition in the indicated North African dialects. (English-speaking) viewers of the work are put into a position of semantic alienation due to their inability to decode meaning from the artwork, and are only granted insight into the meaning of their native language’s words through social communication with a viewer who speaks the relative marginalized North African dialect. For me, the ability of blatant ambiguity to engender social interactions that force viewers from privileged backgrounds into discourse with marginalized cultures is a truly fascinating feature of this work, and serves as a testament to the utilization of ambiguity and obfuscation.

[Post-production/dissemination correspondence]
I have had some form of post-production/dissemination correspondence with a few recipients. In all forms of correspondence, I attempt to maintain the same sense of work-function ambiguity that I apply to the textual commentary of the project, thus leaving it to the recipients to form their own conclusions as to the function of an Ephemera. Recipients are free to engage with Ephemera in any way they wish and are at no time required to enact a performance of an Ephemera.
Some friends have:

- hung their *Ephemera* up on their wall
- made recordings of different interpretations of an *Ephemera*
- made *Ephemera* with me that are not documented
- received an *Ephemera* that is partially destroyed
- never received an *Ephemera* intended for them

[Performance protocol & ownership]

Performances may be:

- private
- public
- with a small collection of friends
- with a large collection of friends
- imagined (in some cases)
- in a concert hall
- anywhere or anytime

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 9]

A quote by Agnes Martin: “They [paintings] go out into the world. And when they go out the door, I don't take any further responsibility…”

Once an *Ephemera* goes out the door, I do not take any further ownership over the object… the recipient becomes the owner of said object.

There may be an authorial dissonance here in the intentionality of the performance protocol:
I, on the surface of it, am interested in *Ephemera* having a finite lifespan and a finite performance history. However, there are ways of subverting this surface intentionality by a) reproducing the work (either physically, or digitally); or b) documenting the performance of any one *Ephemera*. That said, given the framework of the project, I find it acceptable that the work takes on its own life divorced from my original conception of its lifespan. Once the recipient becomes the owner of the work, I relinquish any control over the way in which the artifact operates within the world.

[Textual commentary]

Textual commentary, due to my own subjective interpretations of the project’s concerns, may narrow or expand the scope and efficacy of this project. Currently the project and its resonance with others is largely situated at the local-level, aka: between myself and the recipient. It is a serious question of how far I should contextualize this project’s concerns through textual commentary as a way of engendering mid- to global-level social change or engagement with this project’s artistic concerns.

[Transmissive networks/dissemination]

There is much I could say about the transmissive networks and modes of dissemination at play in this project, but this topic is far too sprawling to be adequately addressed here. Suffice it to say, that the fact that much of this work exists within the realm of the ‘everyday’ (and more pointedly: not in the context of concert-halls) may serve a function of re-framing the environment within which one is accustomed to consuming art. Perhaps, through situating the work outside of traditional mediums of presentation, one can be freed from the constraints (be it social, cultural, or political) imposed by those mediums of presentation, allowing one to engage with the project’s concerns in an uninhibited fashion…
[Political efficacy]

The *Ephemera* project was largely apolitical at conception. Upon reflection though, it has tentatively taken on political dimensions. Reasons for this shift are likely the result of conversations with others regarding the project’s artistic concerns. In particular, numerous people have made mention of the work’s active resistance to mass-commodification, an aspect of the work I was already aware of, but which I had not directly linked to political efficacy. For me, the political efficacy of this work is most evident in its resistance to be easily labeled or classified and in its proposal of meaningful social exchanges. Further, due to the level of willful ambiguity and obfuscation present in this project, there is, for me, a potential element of anti-communication. It is an artistic practice that proposes (unclear) questions about our relationship to objects and the people around us rather than providing easy answers. Whether or not that actually translates to real political or social change is yet to be seen. However, I would argue that, even if there is no resultant or palpable change, that the very fact that people have perceived this as an active element of the project is a testament to the ability of the project to provoke personal reflection on a range of political and social concerns.

[OSCAR MUÑOZ]

As the project is only just now coming around to the idea of taking on political dimensions, the work of artist, Oscar Muñoz, becomes an important consideration for future *Ephemera*. Muñoz is a Columbian artist whose work is explicitly political in nature, often providing commentary on Columbia’s inability to construct a national identity or cultural memory as a result of *The Disappearings*. Muñoz’s works with water and hot concrete, particularly *Re/Trato* and *Project for a Memorial*, are rather striking to me in both their manifestation of ephemerality and in their ability to provoke political (re)consideration. In both of these
works, Muñoz obsessively and compulsively retraces the image of a face with water on hot concrete. Given the material combination at play, the water is constantly evaporating before a fully constructed image of the face is established; just as a portion of the drawing begins to solidify in one’s mind, it is evaporated, and a new aspect of the drawing’s identity comes into focus. At the moment, it is unclear how Muñoz’s practice may influence my own, yet I find the implicit futility and material combinations found in Muñoz’s work an exciting avenue for further exploration.

[Personal resonance with the project]

This general interest in ephemerality is the outgrowth of my own personal experiences. The germ of interest was born from short spurts of intense friendship that were ultimately ephemeral, but for me, all the more meaningful for that reason. Additionally, this project is an attempt to carve out an artistic space for myself that speaks to my personal, social, and political concerns. It aims to add to (and perhaps comment on) the multiplicity of artistic practices currently found within the landscape of new-music creation. At its core, it is an art that, amongst the concerns outlined here, primarily attempts to speak to the value of our personal relationships.

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 10]
see, but hundreds and hundreds of frames where the paintings had hung.”

[PARTIALLY SMUDGE MOCK EPHEMERA – 11]

Appendix A

LIST OF WORKS ENGAGING WITH EPHEMERALITY

Works from the Shards of Experience series:

Ephemera #1:

**Material Construction:** Paper, pencil, card paper, pigment ink.

**Location of Ephemerality:** One-of-a-kind limited-edition nature of Ephemera.

**Performance Protocol/Context:** Recipient’s discretion.

Ephemera #2/(2).2:

**Material Construction:** Semi-transparent paper, pencil, lamination paper, pigment ink.

**Location of Ephemerality:** Rate of production (fast, one-off/gestural inscriptions); partial smudging of text inscription.

**Performance Protocol/Context:** Recipient’s discretion.

Ephemera 1/2.2/[!]3.1-3.3| (20:30-21:13):

**Material Construction:** Paper, lamination sheet, pigment ink.

**Location of Ephemerality:** Method and rate of production. Physical ephemerality: The score is quickly crumpled to provide creases. These creases then serve as points of activation for “violent ink strokes.” The physical action that produced these points of imperfection is then wiped away during the lamination process, rendering the physical action ephemeral. Pigment ink on the surface of the lamination sheet is prone to
smudging dependent on how the *Ephemera* is preserved.

**Performance Protocol/Context:** Recipient’s discretion.

---

*Ephemera 6 –* Window Shopping:

**Material Construction:** Paper, lamination sheet, pigment ink, cardboard “window” (a small cardboard rectangle with a hole cute in the middle).

**Location of Ephemerality:** Enactment of performance.

**Performance Protocol (intended):** The window provided is used to smudge and wipe away the pigment ink from the lamination sheet. ‘Materials’ contained within the window are performable. A performance is complete once the surface of the *Ephemera* is completely wiped away.

**Performance Protocol/Context (suggested):** Recipient’s discretion.

---

*Ephemera 8 –* ‘Notice that my name is the first to burn’:

**Material Construction:** Long and slender panel of balsa wood, pigment ink.

**Location of Ephemerality:** Material construction and performance protocol.

**Performance Protocol (intended):** The *Ephemera* is to be burnt during performance. The rate of score consumption dictates rate/duration of performance.

**Performance Protocol/Context (suggested):** Ambiguous.

---

*Ephemera #9(1.2) –* Three Coffee Marks:

**Material Construction:** Rice paper, coffee grounds, paper, pigment ink, (hot water).

**Location of Ephemerality:** Partial destruction of score post-performance.

**Performance Protocol/Context:** Instructions regarding performance are given. Post-performance, the recipient is instructed to “Make weak coffee when finished.”
Works outside of the *Shards of Experience* project:

*Disintegration:*

**Material Construction:** Paper, pencil.

**Location of Ephemerality:** The score is partially erased post-production. Subsequent performers of the work are permitted to continue erasing portions of the score. There is only one physical copy of the score.

**Performance Protocol/Context:** Concert-hall performances.

*a tentative/tenuous step towards performative awkwardness/clumsiness:*

**Material Construction:** No physical manifestation. Score is presented on a laptop through a custom-made program.

**Location of Ephemerality:** Inclusion of erasure/smudging. Inability to perform any performance program more than once.

**Performance Protocol/Context:** Performers are given a practice program that primes them for certain program-interface behaviors. Immediately prior to performance, performers are given a new performance program that modifies behavioral tendencies found in the practice program. No performance program may be performed more than once. Context: Concert-halls.