

Art for the Occasion

by Anne Mæglin-Delcroix

"Dance cards dropped like flowers that have lost their petals,
a concert program, a list of dinner guests,
all make up a special literature having in itself the immortality of a week or two.
The existence of nothing can be forgotten in an era:
everything belongs to everyone."
Stéphane Mallarmé, *La Dernière Mode*

Could it be that the genealogy of contemporary art goes back further than Marcel Duchamp? In fact, he was the first to recognize in the work of Mallarmé the model, *par excellence*, of a "dry art."¹ "Mallarmé was a great figure. It is in this direction that art should go—towards an intellectual expression rather than an animal expression."² The importance of this late nineteenth-century French poet could thus be wider than the specific influence that *Un coup de dés* had on concrete poetry or on Marcel Broodthaers. It affects the very spirit of contemporary art.

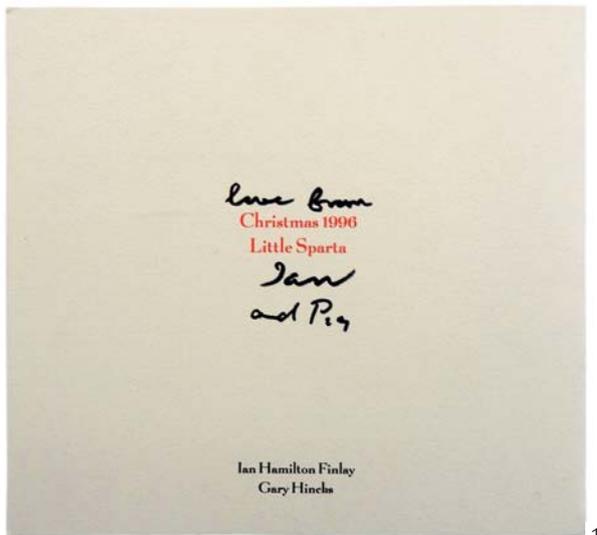
Mallarmé, then, can help us to understand what is involved in artists' ephemera works, at least up to a certain point. If we rely on the Greek etymology, ephemera works should be works that last no more than a day. But if we rely on common usage, they are works made for a specific day or announce what will take place on a given date. Their short life is simply the result of their immediate obsolescence. Over a period of nearly twenty years, from 1881 to 1898, besides his major works, Mallarmé dedicated many very short poems to his friends for different occasions. He turned postal addresses on envelopes into verse, he wrote poetic lines on stones that he picked up on the beach at Honfleur, on bottles of Calvados, and on fans; he created invitations for the launch of a periodical, and he sent little verses to his friends to celebrate all manner of occasions. These verses share two characteristics with artists' ephemera works. On the one hand, they are made for special occasions and the content is specific to a given day; for this reason, they are often modest and unpretentious. On the other hand, they are nevertheless works that make an original artistic contribution to the information they communicate.

In this respect, artists' greeting cards are obviously the closest to Mallarmé's own personal messages: greetings for Christmas or the New Year which, at the same time, are little printed works sent as gifts to friends. The tradition of this type of message is old, even if over the last forty years it has taken very different forms from the traditional little print slipped into an envelope and sent by mail, such as a postcard, a flyer, or a little book made for an occasion, like those that Ian Hamilton Finlay used to send every year to his friends at Christmas with the words, "Christmas 19..," either printed or handwritten.

Since the 1960s, the number of artists' ephemera works has grown considerably, and their nature, as their function, have become increasingly diversified. This phenomenon can be explained by new directions in artistic creation, generated by a general mistrust of the object. One way in which artists translate this mistrust is by emphasizing the importance of time over that of space in the visual arts. The dimension of time then takes on one of two aspects: either the duration of a pro-

cess, or the appointed moment. In both cases, whether it is to record short-lived actions or announce an event to come, it becomes necessary to develop strategies of documentation and information that become integral parts of the artistic activity. Printed paper in all its forms is one means among others, but as an invitation to an artistic event, it is obviously more suitable than video or photography.

This is why, no matter how great their diversity, artists' ephemera works have something in common that distinguishes them from Mallarmé's occasional verses. His poems are a kind of aside, an addition, to his work and are not intrinsically related to it. The only relation is one of contrast: they are doggerel, poetic games, frivolous and unimportant, and they demonstrate the poet's virtuosity in writing little nothings that have no other purpose than to entertain those who receive them. Artists' ephemera works are also part of the realm of the "little" and of the detail, of the secondary and the minor. But, unlike Mallarmé's occasional verses, they rarely stand on their own, and most of them belong to and complement a larger work. In some cases this complement is accessory; in others it is necessary. Even though ephemera works are marginal to the work as a whole, their function is not always marginal. Using a few particularly significant examples, we can demonstrate this.



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In the following discussion, the main outline of a typology will be briefly sketched out. We do not intend to be exhaustive, for, even if we tried, we simply could not be since the production takes on so many forms. This attempt at a typology merely aims at isolating several major trends. It is based not on material criteria (filing of documents by types: cards, posters, flyers, etc.), but on criteria of function in relation to the different ways in which ephemera works take hold of the factor of time.

The Announcement and/or the Work

As for the accessory complement, the most common type is that of announcement cards that are for the most part invitations to an exhibition and on which is found all the relevant information about it. Since the 1960s, the artist has often been the author, for during a period when there was an increasingly widespread claim to freedom in all areas, the artist also sought to control the manner in

which his work was presented and in particular, the information circulated about it, from announcement cards and posters, to the catalog. Thus, each card becomes, in addition to being a means of information, a work printed for the exhibition. Usually they are simply cards with an image printed recto and practical information on the reverse. But it is the artist who has conceived the content and the design.

Nonetheless, some of these announcement cards are exceptional in the genre. Because of his own and barely readable typography and the unusual presentation (card cut in the shape of a star or a strip of wrinkled paper, for example), the announcement cards of James Lee Byars are probably the most easily identifiable examples of a document that is first of all a work. This is all the more so because, generally, these cards have no information about the exhibition; instead, this is printed on the envelope, which is also conceived by the artist. Visually and conceptually, these announcement cards are thus an introduction to the work exhibited and, depending on the work itself, provide a little fragment of it or an enigmatic introduction to it.



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Nearly all the "bulletins" published by Art & Project in Amsterdam between 1968 and 1989 are in the format of a large sheet of paper folded in half along the vertical axis so that there are four pages; these are then folded in three horizontal sections so that the bulletin can be sent as a letter. On the first page, in addition to the number of the bulletin—thus presenting it as a kind of periodical—is the name of the artist with, where appropriate, the dates of his exhibition. The three other pages are put at the artist's disposal so that he or she can create a work for the occasion and for the format. Several of the issues are particularly remarkable, such as *No. 43*, for which Sol LeWitt simply folded the white paper into squares; or *No. 24*, a non-project by Buren, who decided that this issue would not have a material existence but would be nevertheless numbered in the series. The role of these bulletins thus goes beyond the straightforward announcement of an exhibition. They immediately suggest little moveable works that travel by post or are taken away from the gallery by the visitor. In this way, art and information on art become one. They also make it possible for the artist to reach a much wider public than that of the gallery. But above all, the traditional relation between publication and exhibition is reversed: following a strategy similar to that of the catalogs published by Seth Siegelaub, also as of 1968, the publication becomes more important than the exhibition and sometimes takes its place.

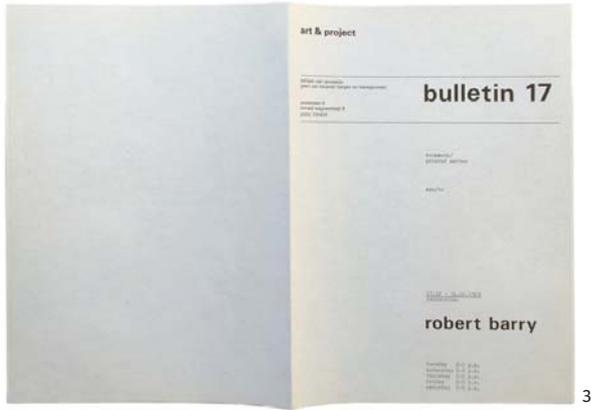
The distinction, then, between the occasional invitation and the occasional work is not always easy to make, particularly in the realm of conceptual art. A series of eight announcement cards (in fact, seven cards and one flyer), conceived by Robert Barry in 1972-1973, is a good example. Together, they make up *Invitation Piece*, a circular path that took place over one year, month to month and gallery to gallery, each gallery announcing "an exhibition by Robert Barry," to be held not in their own gallery but in the next one. "The piece describes a large geographical circuit (the itinerary that I normally take each year to make my exhibitions) and an artistic season, from October to June."³ Artist's ephemera work? Autonomous conceptual work? Both. This piece is in the same vein as works on the invisible which, in 1969, led the artist to send announcement cards where it was stated that the gallery would be closed during the exhibition. One might think that such a series of cards was inviting one to a series of exhibitions which, in the logic of conceptual art, use printed space as an alternative to the physical space of the gallery. The paradox is that, in order to do this, these invitations utilize the invisible network of contemporary art galleries and by so doing, make it visible. The sequence of mailings made it clear that the participating galleries in Europe and the United States were not only offering gallery space, but each gallery became a link in the solidarity of an international organization that is the contemporary art market. In other words, the eight announcement cards are also a fully-fledged work that is both analytical and critical. In this context, the calendar of exhibitions announced—which in fact is vague because only the months are given—proposes no specific occasion but a formal structure: any series of sequential dates could be used to demonstrate this.

The Announcement Before and After

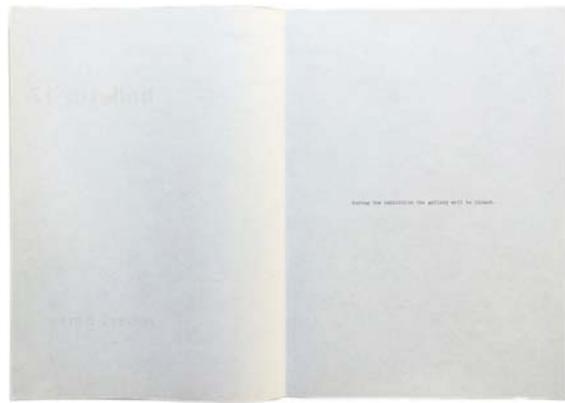
Thus we have touched on those necessary complements that are often ephemera works. It is no longer only a question of announcing an exhibition but, in using this announcement, to make a work exist. Also belonging to this category are all the little printed matter such as flyers, posters, cards, and advertisements in newspapers and magazines, which are all part of the preparation of a project. Among them we find invitations to happenings, such as those of Allan Kaprow, to performances and other actions which could not succeed without the participation of the public invited by the artist and to whom a program, a score, or instructions are sometimes given. These invitations function like announcement cards for an exhibition except that, without them, the event could not take place: the announcement is not separate from the project and is an essential condition to its realization.

In recent art there have been real citywide publicity campaigns that have taken the place of the mailings, common in the 1960s and 1970s, to a selected audience that was often limited to professional networks. There have been posters stuck up on city billboards or announcements published in the major local daily newspapers that invite a public outside the art world to participate, for example, in lecture-demonstrations by Matthieu Laurette. Thus, we read that on such and such a date and in such and such a place, the artist will explain "how to make refunded purchases" in department stores. In this case, posters and advertisements in newspapers or flyers are not only the means necessary to the realization of the work, but also, they are the only documentation that records it. The announcement is at the same time the archive of the event.

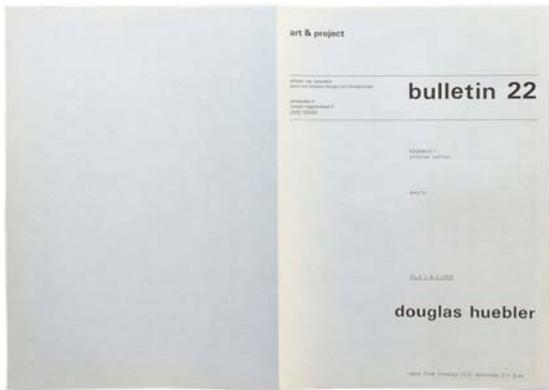
When the action is private it does not require any announcement or advertising in order to be realized. Only documents that record it are necessary. The artist no longer needs to invite anyone to an appointed time and place but only to certify that the action took place. Without a publication, it would remain known only to those who participated and would have no artistic existence. When actions are being documented, photographs or video recordings are invaluable; however,



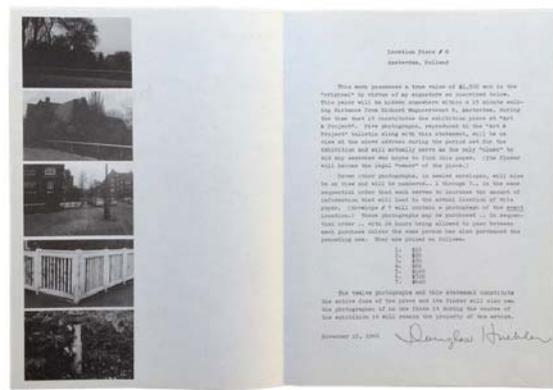
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the objection to them is that they transform into images what was an experience, and into a permanent object what was of the moment. But the little cards announcing the walks taken by Christian Boltanski, Jean Le Gac, and Paul-Armand Gette in 1970 and 1971, sent after each walk to around one hundred addresses, say simply that a walk had taken place in such and such a month and to such and such a place, and it carries a number in the series. In announcing the action, these little cards make it public but without illustrating it. They play the role of a certificate or a registration.

Similar to Laurette's publicity flyers, these cards-certificates reveal the conceptual significance of an art that cannot be separated from information, whether the latter is prior to or follows the action. In both, the documents are in any case the only visible form of the event or the action and, as a result, the only possible form of the exhibition of the work. We could, then, rightly call them primary documents.

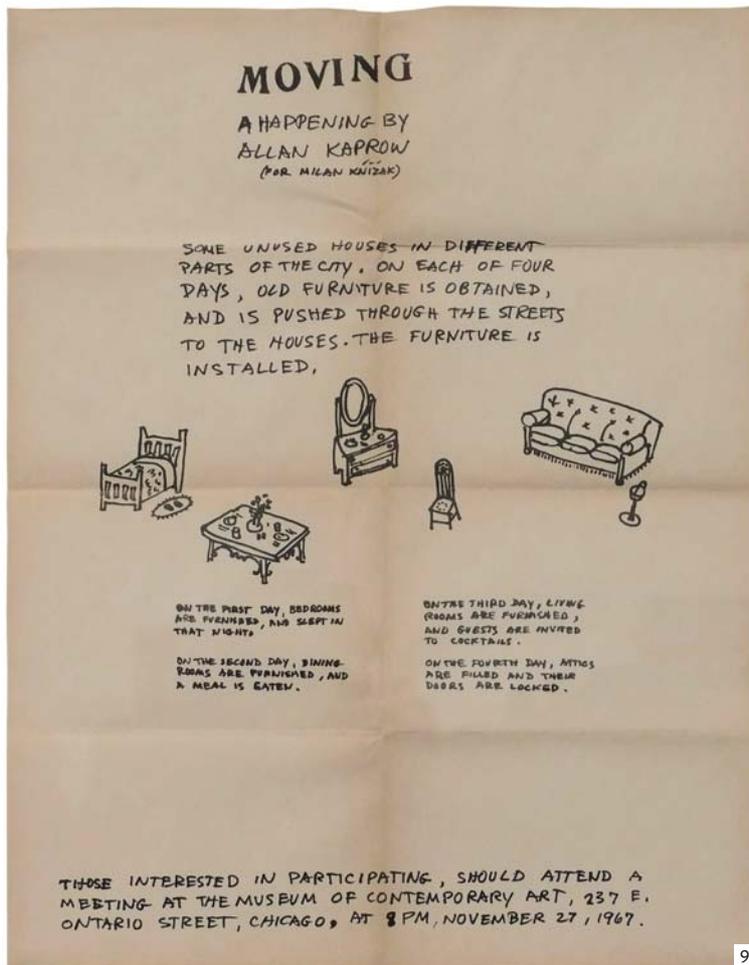
The Announcement and the Relic

Different from the document of a past action that proves after the fact that it once took place and retains, abstractly but absolutely, its memory, the relic is a material vestige that remains from what once existed but has now disappeared. It is a real part of what was. That is why it is a concrete but fragile memory. To this category belong the remains of actions like, for example, bits of paper used by Byars during certain performances, or the stickers, "Caution Art Corrupts," which Jochen Gerz stuck up in public places in 1968, especially in Florence and in Basel, at the time of his first street actions. To this same category also belong the remains of environments as, for example, all the little printed matter added by Martine Aballéa to her sets to enliven the atmosphere, which visitors could take away: publicity cards, beverage coasters, notepads, coupons, stationery, and so on.

It is worth discussing in a bit more detail a case that is more complex—that of an ephemera work that brings together both the announcement and the relic. This is the series of announcement posters by Daniel Buren for his five exhibitions at the gallery Wide Wide Space in Antwerp as of 1969. The posters were printed on both sides, the one with striped bands and the other carrying the practical information about the exhibition. They were folded in the format of a large envelope. From one exhibition to another, the only changes were—other than the obvious correction of dates—the color of the stripes, the choice of which the artist left to the gallery owner, Anny De Decker. But the most interesting point is that Buren used the announcement poster as the element of construction of his work *in situ*: he glued the posters edge to edge in the space of the gallery, each time in different places. The information on the work as announced became the primary material of the work itself. The announcement poster became the key element of the exhibition from three points of view: that of the material, that of the form, and that of the significance of the work exhibited. As a result, the sequence of exhibitions can appear in retrospect as so many variations generated by the original announcement poster. Each one can be considered not only as a fragment of the work or of the exhibition, but as its basic module. It thus becomes the very condition of the exhibition. Reversing the normal relation of the invitation as secondary to the exhibition and of the exhibition as secondary to the work, here the invitation is primary, that which makes possible both the work and the exhibition. But once the work *in situ* is taken down, the invitation now becomes its last relic.

Whether it is an accessory or a necessary complement, whether it is a secondary or primary document, whether it comes before or after, or is part of some-

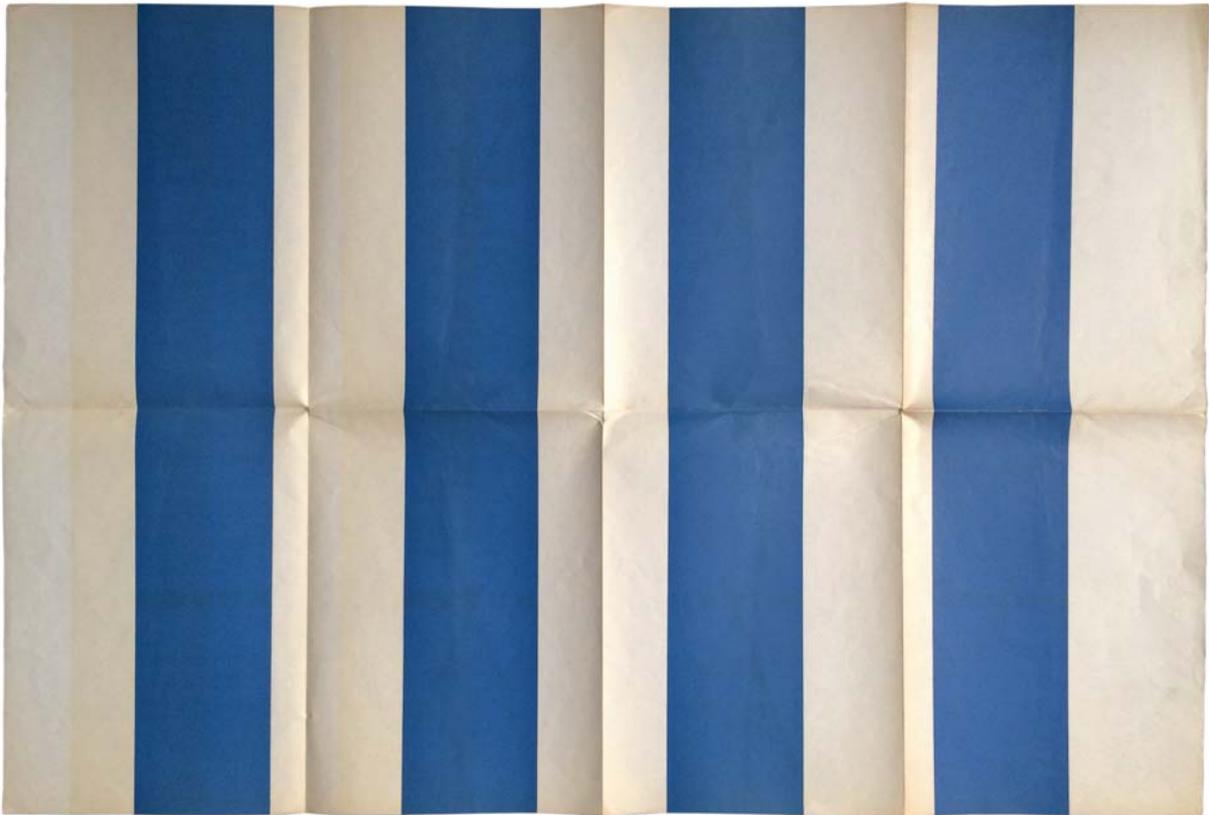
thing that took place on a given date, the ephemera work takes up a challenge: to archive the ephemeral, and in so doing, to inscribe the moment in duration. It doesn't prevent what is temporary from disappearing, but it does prevent it from disappearing from memory. Just as the meaning of the word "monument" was understood in the Renaissance to be a written document, so the ephemera work can be said to be a fragile monument that retains and transmits what takes place only once.



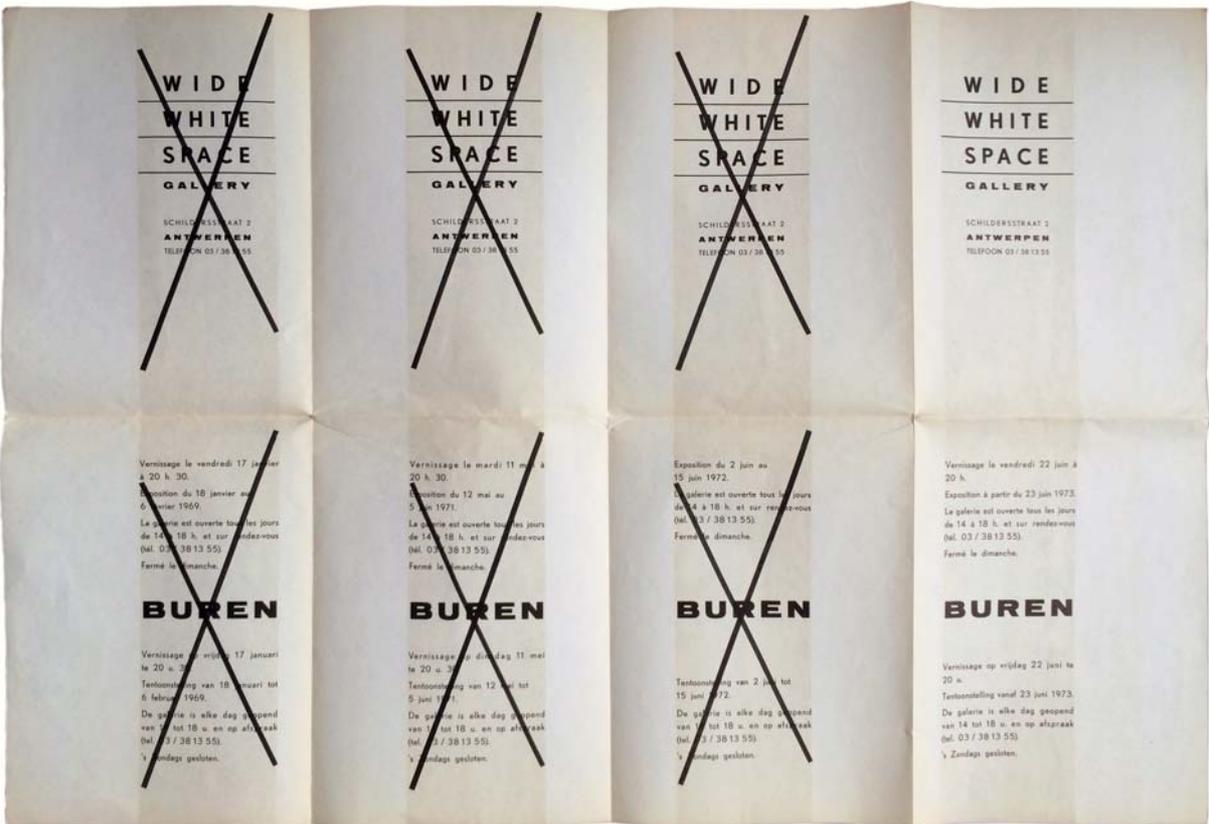
Works for Occasions

As we have seen, ephemera works depend on works made for an occasion that they announce or record or of which they are a relic. Yet, they may also be sufficient unto themselves. Then they are independent works but whose existence, that is, their publication, either depends on a precise day or is rooted in the present. This present is, by definition, imposed. Yet it happens that the present can be invented. It also happens that it can be denounced.

To this category of works for occasions belong greeting cards, discussed at the beginning, as do works that celebrate a particular event. For example, there is the commemorative stamp designed in 1972 by Joyce Wieland for World Health Day, which does not distinguish itself from the many commemorative stamps published regularly by the post office, except for the fact that it was commissioned from an artist.



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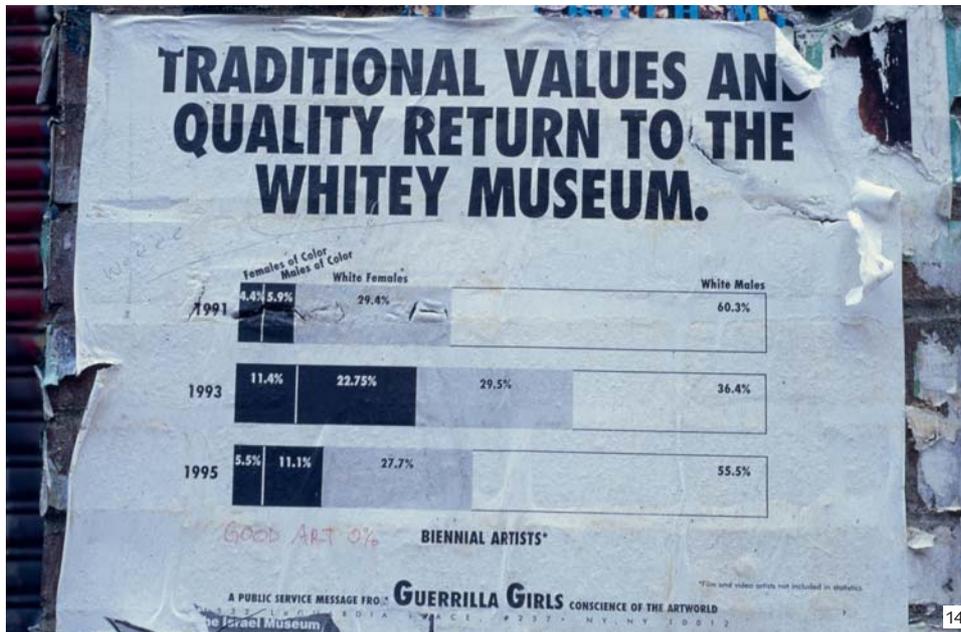
the old prison situated on an island off the French Atlantic coast, to listen to or watch works by Finlay, Julien Blaine, Brion Gysin, Gil Wolman, Françoise Dufrêne, Mimmo Rotella, among others. But the two artists had decided that this festival would take place only on posters. There were some, however, who made the trip! It was not only a joke, but a homage to the power of the imagination and of the independence of art in relation to reality. Some time later, in a collective booklet in which the posters were reproduced and the story recounted, Chopin concluded with the claim that a year before May 1968, the organizers had already put imagination into power: "We were not post- or pre-revolutionaries, not even revolutionaries, but living beings who placed creation in non-creation above all else."⁵ The event was thus not a festival but a series of posters with their imagined program, apparently written into the calendar, but in fact, totally independent of its constraints and even beyond the possibility of failure. These announcement posters give the lie to common sense, which expects works for occasions to be regulated by the principle of reality even more than other works.



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At the extreme opposite, that of an actual engagement in real situations, we must make room for a last category, one that is rich in examples of work that reacts to the burning issues of the day in the form of protest and indignation. These are committed publications in the tradition of lampooning pamphlets of the eighteenth century or of agit-prop in the twentieth century. These ephemera works are the weapons of a war against certain aspects of the contemporary art world or simply of the modern world itself. The tone is often that of irony or of anger. There is no shortage of examples: derisive open letters by Broodthaers aptly named "polemical postcards" by Simon Cutts; anonymous postcards by Le Gac, poking fun in recent years at several bizarre tactics in the functioning of contemporary art in France; "occasional cards" ("cartes de circonstance") sent by Ernest T., of which a large part of the printed production is openly polemical, in particular the periodical *Cloaca maxima*, named after the sewers of ancient Rome, printed on yellow onion-skin flyers and self-published spasmodically between 1985 and 1988; the militant posters of the Guerrilla Girls against sexism in art; Finlay's letterhead paper on which he had printed various scathing quotations taken from eighteenth-century French revolutionaries in support of his battle against the regional Strathclyde officialdom and police assault on his garden, which he called Little Sparta for the occasion; or, also by Finlay, the countless cards and booklets inspired by the French Revolution and directed against those of the Paris art world who intrigued against him at the time he had received an official commission for a garden to celebrate the

bicentenary of the Revolution of 1789; the first tract by Roberto Martinez and Antonio Gallego as a reaction to the war in Yugoslavia in 1993 (*Tombola Paris-Sarajevo*), and so on.



The pressure of events is sometimes such that it can transform temporarily an artist's magazine into an ephemera work. This is the case with *Eter*, edited by Gette, that contained contributions from various artists and appeared irregularly two or three times a year, but which changed radically in May 1968 in order to intervene rapidly and effectively. It took the title, *Eter contestation*, and was printed on heavy card whose single sheet was folded in half. Created collectively by Gette, Jean Degottex, Claude Bellegarde, and Constantin Xenakis, the three issues appeared in quick succession: on 30 May, 3 and 18 June. "No" is the "mot d'ordre" branded across the inside double page spread of the first issue, which carried a list of everything that should be rejected in contemporary society, to which the second issue supplies this slogan as a response: "Yes create the continuous revolution" ("Oui créez la révolution continue"). The third issue contains a folded poster printed in big red block letters and whose text is about strikes, demonstrations, confrontations with the police, etc. Each of the issues was left in several places for anyone to take, and for a few days the magazine became a kind of political tract.

Of course, these weapons are paper weapons but, for the same reason, they can be printed and circulated quickly. Most of them are self-published, inexpensive in time and money, intentionally unassuming, and unintentionally clandestine. Because they are meant to respond to the urgency of a situation, they last only for the time it takes to hand them out or send them.

More generally, we can say in concluding that ephemera works have something that is intrinsically provocative as regards the common practices of art in so far as they claim to be in the here and now. Thus their lack of pretense to timelessness. In their essence they are the most "contemporary" of the art we call contemporary, for they are absolutely *in time* and *of their time*. That being the case, that is why they retain, perhaps more than other works, the most radical of what contemporary art has brought to the history of the visual arts: a relation to work that is no longer contemplation but reading.

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Translated from the French by Patricia Railing.

Notes

- 1 Marcel Duchamp, "Interview: Marcel Duchamp – James Johnson Sweeney," in Michel Sanouillet ed., *Duchamp du Signe: Écrits*, Flammarion, Paris, 1976, p. 179.
- 2 Cited by Octavio Paz in *Marcel Duchamp: L'Apparence mise à nu ...*, trans. Monique Fong, Gallimard, Paris, 1977, p. 81.
- 3 Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International*, February 1968. Ursula Meyer, "De-objectification of the Object," *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1969.
- 4 Robert Barry, *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 1989, p. 122.
- 5 *Festival de Fort-Boyard 1967*, Punto, Turin, Italy, 1970, unpaginated.

Captions

- 1 Back of Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Midship Section*, Christmas 1996, Little Sparta, Sammlung Stampa, Basel.
- 2 James Lee Byars, *A Drop of Black Perfume*, Invitation for performance at the Furka Pass, Switzerland, 1983, Sammlung Francesca Pia, Bern.
- 3, 4 Outside and inside of Robert Barry, *Art & Project*, 1969, Sammlung Christoph Schifferli, Zurich.
- 5, 6 Outside and inside of Douglas Huebler, *Art & Project*, 1970, Sammlung Christoph Schifferli, Zurich.
- 7, 8 Outside and inside of Alighiero Boetti, *Art&Project*, 1972, Sammlung Christoph Schifferli, Zurich.
- 9 Allan Kaprow, *Moving*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1967.
- 10 Matthieu Laurette, *Vivons remboursés*, Nantes: Association Entre Deux, 1997.
- 11, 12 Daniel Buren, *Buren*, Antwerp, Belgium: Wide White Space Gallery, 1973, Sammlung Christoph Schifferli, Zurich.
- 13 Stephen Kaltenbach, *Artforum Ads*, November 1968 – December 1969, series of twelve artist's advertisements. *Tell a lie*, *Artforum*, New York, February 1969.
- 14 Guerrilla Girls, poster in the urban space, photographed in New York City, 1995.

Anne Mæglin-Delcroix is professor emeritus of philosophy of art at the Sorbonne. From 1979 to 1994, she was in charge of the collection of artists' books and small press at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. She curated several exhibitions on the international production of artists' books, notably at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1985), the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris, 1997), Casa del Mantegna (Mantua, 2004), and FRAC PACA (Marseille, 2015). She is the author of several books on this subject, among which the revised and expanded edition of *Esthétique du livre d'artiste* (2012). She has been co-curating the artists' book collection *Reprint* since 2012.

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