Traces, Glimmers, Residues, and Specks of Things: In Praise of Ephemera

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Abstract

What does ephemera have to tell us about research through design? How does thinking about the mayfly qualities of some of the things we make help us to situate our knowledges? In this paper, I will begin to explore these questions, interwoven with a story of making something out of the remnants of other acts of design research. Building on José Esteban Muñoz's influential essay 'Ephemera as Evidence', I consider the ways in which ephemera offers a means for design-research to navigate between being present and response-able to events with producing representations as part of our obligations to the larger structure of 'doing research'.

Introduction

Small things collect in my desk drawers, leftovers from doing design: safety matches, a container of salt from a trip to the beach with the students, magnets, pretty pieces of string, model figures, air drying clay, connectors to electronics I no longer have, kendal mint cake to keep spirits up.

I have drawers full of printed ephemera: flyers for events long past, tourist maps for places I'll never return, yellowing newspapers, and all the other

assorted artefact that graphic designer make but were never meant to last. Most graphic designers I know have a similar collection. We hoard it like treasure, conserve it, curators of our own personal museum of inconsequential things. It's a kind of proof that while the rest of the world might not care about what we make, we do. We notice, we remember.

Anti-Evidence, Anti-Matter

Needing to work a small act of magic, I take these out of the drawer and start assembling … I don't know what. I do not give them a name.

Ephemerality is a central question within performance studies. Famously, Peggy Phelan wrote that performance 'becomes itself through disappearance' [6:146]. Phelan asserted that performance 'cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.' (Ibid). This ephemeral nature of performance presents a challenge to both an art world that is centred on objects and images, and also for the research world's concern for evidence.

However, Muñoz argues that, rather than a deficit which threaten to undermine the material and empirical standing of performance research, ephemera as a form of 'anti-evidence and anti-rigour' presents an opportunity to expand and reformulate it [5:10]. In pursuing ephemera by 'following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things' (ibid), we can open up the possibility of new performances, rather than repeating and reinforcing what has already come to be.

Speculative design-research shares this desire to engage with the material and the empirical in search of finding previously anticipated possibilities. I have experienced speculation as an often-subtle perceptual shift, a momentary glimpse of something previously unanticipated that results from encountering something that can't explain itself. So I would like to suggest that speculative research is performative, and in more than just in the sense that it has a hand in enacting the world, rather than just describing it. Speculative research is also like a performance. Many researchers in speculative research are often keen to avoid using the term performative. Instead favouring instead terms like enactment or eventuation that less strongly connote both the presence of an audience and human-centred agency [4]. However, there is something to be gained from making this comparison, particularly in understanding ephemera as a distinct form of evidence.

Being Present, Making Representations

I take these nameless things out to Nuns Moor, and let them shape my hands, guide my path, lead my eyes. I cut into this movement with my camera. Halt and flow, halt and flow.

Making this connection between performance and speculative design research offers a way to account for experiences that are not easily captured by conventional research methods. Felt but not fully materialized, almost by their nature, such events are unlikely to be as neatly or easily captured as data. How do we account then for these things that are experienced but not evidenced?

In design research, the answer to this has typically been reflective writing. Reflective writing is framed as a

means to make the experience and practice of design available as 'data' to be analysed. However, as Barad pointed out irony of reflection as metaphor is that it seems to offer a way to get closer to the 'truth' of something, but it does so by visually distancing ourselves from the object of our investigation.[1]. However, this tension between getting closer to research events as they happen and making representations is at the heart of design-research.

Design-research understood as a dialogical practice [8] starts from a commitment to staging research encounters that are capable of *becoming with* others (human or otherwise). However, our ability to be present and responsible within the context of such encounters is inevitably shaped by larger commitments to producing research and/or design outputs. As such, these encounters are inescapably staged in order that the design-researcher can report on them. Even as designer-researcher is becoming entangled in events, we are preparing to make a representation of it. This is because the event is situated within a larger activity of 'doing research'. This means that whatever our desire to be present and response-able to what is in front of us, we cannot forget the way we are entangled in larger structures which also demand our response.

However, ephemera sits somewhere in between the event and the representations of events. Muñoz writes that ephemera is 'a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself' [5]. Ephemera is a mark left by events, one that connects us to them after they've happened. Design-research so often aims to produce engaging, entangling with events and others to produce hyperlocal material-discursive practices of knowing. And yet, we must also prepare to

cut ourselves off from these forms of becoming, to represent these events to academic publics. We know that some artefacts and practices travel between these better than others. Ephemera offers a means to trace these journeys and understand what was lost and gained in between.

Between being and becoming

Back at my desk, I work through the photographs; I make further cuts. Cut, crop, paste, filter, cut. Always another cut to be made. I reach for words. Some come quickly, others I need to root around for in the mud to find the right form. Pull them up and onto the page.

Printed ephemera isn't just hoarded by obsessive graphic designers. It is collected and presented in museums. The Ephemera Society was established in 1975 to conserve, study and present printed and handwritten ephemera [9]. And yet, collected in this way it is no longer really ephemera in Muñoz's sense. For Muñoz, ephemera remains connected to lived experiences, to a social scene. Ephemera collected and traded is just another commodity, just another kind of evidence of what has happened. In contrast Munoz asks us to consider how archival practices could be reconfigured by ephemera.

Applied to design-research, ephemera offers a way to reconfigure how we negotiate being present and making representations. Sarah Pink has written about how transcripts and other research documents are not just texts to be analysed but means to connect through memory and imagination with the original encounter. Ephemera allows the moment to reappear but, like a ghost, when the moment returns, 'they "return" *and* make their apparitional debut' [2:11]. It sensitises us

to the fact that '[t]he past is never finished once and for all and out of sight may be out of reach but not necessary out of touch' [1:394].

Thinking about the documents and artefacts that design-research produces as ephemera helps us to understand them as situated knowledges [3]. However, reflexively situating knowledges always comes with risk of essentializing the positionalities described [1]. However, ephemera doesn't connect us straightforwardly to a static past. Instead it offers a means to reconfigure what has happened before. Since it is intimately tied to performance, it invites the possibility of being performed again and performed *differently [7]*. As such, it is ephemera is a bridge between one performance and the next. Applied to design-research, this offers means to understand and manage our role as we go between being and becoming.

I print it out, bind and trim it. It is perhaps a shade too designed to be properly be called a zine. A chapbook, perhaps. I scan the printed chapbook to make a PDF to pass around, a tracing of the thing, but not the thing itself.

Reference

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