Ephemeral art: mourning and loss

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Ephemeral Art: Mourning and Loss

by

Mary O' Neill

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of

Doctor of Philosophy

Loughborough University
June 2007

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Abstract

Ephemeral art is usually understood as reflecting a desire to dematerialize the art object in order to evade the demands of the market, or to democratize or challenge art museums. However, in many ephemeral artworks something much more fundamental is involved. In this thesis I explore the hypothesis that the use of ephemerality by some artists is best understood, not solely in terms of art world issues but of the relationship between ephemerality, mourning and loss.

I will begin with a refinement of the definition of ephemeral art, which is often confused with temporary works. This definition identifies four characteristics of ephemeral art: time, communicative act, inherent vice and directive intent. Ephemeral art often involves works that do not exist in a steady state, but change or decay slowly. This temporal aspect is examined through a discussion of the boredom they consciously evoke, which can be seen not only as an acute awareness of time but also a form of mourning for lost desire. The different physical state of ephemeral works represents a shift from the art object to communicative act. This shift is exemplified by artists working in the 1960s, particularly those influenced by John Cage. Cage’s engagement with Buddhism and the subsequent work he produced demonstrates that the appreciation of transience is a reflection of wider cultural values. The growing interest in Buddhist philosophy and the engagement with transience at that period are discussed, not as cause and effect, but as both stemming from the same desire to find alternative forms of meaning and expression at a time when traditional structures of meaning were in decline. The use of non-traditional, non-durable materials and the incorporation of chance and ephemerality mean that the resulting worlds possess an ‘inherent vice’ which results in the demise or disappearance of the work. This is a key feature of ephemeral art, which distinguishes it from temporary works. The latter are designed to function for a fixed period, after which they are discarded or
destroyed. The former decay over time, and this decay is an essential part of the communicative act which conveys their meaning.

Ephemeral art poses a considerable challenge for art museums. As collecting institutions their entire raison d'être, expressed in their governing rules, is to acquire work which endures into an indefinite future. This is explored in detail through a study of the output of conferences and initiatives dedicated to the discussion of the preservation of artworks that were not intended to endure in this way. The issue which arises from this, the distinction between the artist's intention and the values of museums, leads to a discussion of the final characteristic of ephemeral art. Focusing on Liz Magor's *Time and Mrs Tiber* the final component, directive intent, is explored.

In part two I will begin with an elaboration of the assumption in Western culture that art objects are durable from economic, cultural and psychological perspectives. The promise of a form of immortality offered by canonical art is disrupted by the transience of ephemeral works: in the pieces under discussion, this reflects traumatic experiences of bereavement, which is the key to understanding ephemeral art. The final two chapters deal with specific works, approaching them not merely as oppositional or protest art, or even as being about loss, but offering an experience of mourning and grief. *Untitled (Portrait of Dad)* by Felix Gonzalez Torres, *Strange Fruit (for David)* by Zoe Leonard, *Reading for Corpses* by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsnook, *Collecting Displaced Bones* by Dadang Christanto, *1001 Nights* by Barbara Campbell and my work *In Memory* are all works whose ephemerality embodies a narrative of untimely bereavement and mourning. These works are produced by artists from very different cultures but who share the experience of a premature death – a death outside the normal cycle of the generations, whether due to epidemic or political violence. The circumstance may vary but these works share the four characteristics of the precise definition of ephemeral art in a way which confirms my thesis that there is a significant relationship between an engagement with transience and mourning. There are striking parallels between the experiences evoked by these works and the stages and states of grief described in the relevant psychological and psychoanalytical literature. The works themselves become part of the working through of the pain of bereavement, of what Freud called griefwork.

The conclusions drawn have implications that reach beyond artworld concerns with durable or at least preservable commodities. These works offer insights into the mourning process which are powerful and profound reflections on the human
condition. These works can act as a means of engaging with bereavement, disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss. In a world where many societies may be deemed post-religious traditional myths and rituals that once served to alleviate fear or mortality and the pain of bereavement are no longer viable or effective, this is of immense significance.
Acknowledgements

"The end is the beginning and yet you go on"
Samuel Beckett  *Endgame*

For my precious babies Sam and Alex; Sam whose ending was the beginning of this journey, and Alex who is proof that we go on.

Mere thanks are inadequate to express my gratitude for the help and encouragement given by my supervisor, Dr. Marsha G. Meskimmon. The session we spent in discussion became the highlight of my time at Loughborough. Her breath of knowledge is inspirational and her enthusiasm and energy is infectious.

To my brother Mark and my husband Peter for their love, patience, support, and their faith in me.
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On Saturday mornings, we would sit in the side aisles of the dark church. Above us on the wall were the ‘Stations of the Cross’. This graphic narrative of misery and pain acted out in full colour around us - always ending the same way. This closed loop oppressed me because of the inevitability of the execution. Adults from another time and place forced me to watch their cruelty:- it was nothing to do with me and yet I was a captive witness. The scourging at the pillar, the crowning with thorns and the vinegar soaked sponge created the atmosphere in which we confessed our childish misdemeanours. My sins were always the same – I was disobedient, told lies, said bad words and had evil thoughts. All the memories of confession exist now as one single memory, as if I only went once, but I know this is not the case. We would huddle together in a row, waiting our turn, fearing the penance that would be given to us as a reminder and evidence of our sinfulness. As one person left the confession box, another entered, and I moved nearer to the door, I would begin to feel apprehensive and ask my brothers and sister for sins just in case my litany was not comprehensive enough, or somehow wrong. I rehearsed the list, feeling particularly ambivalent about ‘evil thoughts’. The all-encompassing nature of this sin was useful but I wasn’t sure if it would withstand any interrogation. The confessional had a door on either side and the priest sitting in the central section would alternate between hearing a confession on his left and right. So while I was shuffling in and out he would be hearing the sordid details of some other seven year old’s existence. The box was dark with a hard kneeling ledge at one side and a higher ledge where I could rest my elbows, hands jointed, head bowed in supplication. I could hear the murmured Latin words of absolution as the other poor sinner was being released from their sins and eventually the panel on their side would bang shut and, as they were released, the shutter on my side would open, allowing in a tiny amount of light. 'Bless
me father for I have sinned; it’s been three weeks since my last confession’. Behind the grill, the silhouette figure would nod in bored encouragement and I would regurgitate my prepared list. The unknown figure would again gesture to indicate that these sins were satisfactory and this would signal that I should recite the act of contrition, my request for absolution, while the priest performed his act of magic and restored to me to a state in which I could safely die without the risk of eternal damnation. ‘Oh my God I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest my sins above every other evil . . . ‘. I did occasionally long for an obscure or outrageously lengthy penance, and wondered what I would have to do to get the Memorare - the plea for help for ‘the poor banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears’, but invariably it was three Hail Marys and an Our Father. Confession made, absolution given and penance done, we would go home lighter not because we were religiously cleansed but because the ordeal was over for another while.

The element of confessing alone was not the entirety of the rite. For the act to be successful, it was merely the beginning of the trine that included true contrition and priestly absolution. This act was not optional, not a form of ‘self denial’ to achieve ‘self mastery’ but a compulsory duty, an absolute necessity, and the punishment for non-compliance was eternal damnation. Neither was this a public act, while although we queued in rows the process itself was a private conversation, the faceless priest speaking a language we didn’t understand was not an individual but a conduit through which one spoke to God

Oh My God I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest my sins. . . and I firmly resolve never to sin again.
Preface

Ephemeral art is often viewed as protest or anti-art reacting to the materialism and commercialisation of the art world and the fetishization of the art object and in the majority of cases this is true. However, in this research I intend to focus on a particular type of short-lived art which reflects the positive aspects of ephemerality and to articulate an aesthetic of transience which enables the viewer to experience an enhanced awareness of time and what Freud called 'grief work'.¹ At the outset of this research project, my main aim was a desire to test a tentative hypothesis that a concern for memory and loss in art practice has characteristics in common with the motivation to create ephemeral art works. However, as my research progressed I became aware that the memory involved in ephemeral art is inextricably linked to the memory work of mourning and this changed the emphasis of this thesis. Rather than focus on the demise of the works, this research will concentrate on the experience involved in the works themselves while

¹ In his development of Freud’s grief theory, Erich Lindemann is credited with coining the phrase ‘grief work’ in his 1944 article “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief” in American Journal of Psychology, reprinted in Vol 151(6), 1994 151-160. This concept relates to the work a bereaved person must do to work through the process of grief. It will be discussed at length in relation to particular works of art in the second section of this dissertation. What is significant at his stage is that it is a process and is reflected in Ephemeral Art in both process of making and viewing.
they exist and on their afterlife or as they survive in both memory and in the form of
documentation.

Many writers describe a sense that their subject chose them rather than vice versa and my
experience of the six works that are central to this research is similar. Over the three years of
working on this thesis and the many more years of looking at and thinking about art, the moment
of first encounter with these six works stand out as epiphanies. Each one came as an accident or
incidentally in the course of some other activity or chance conversation, but I instantly knew that
it would be significant to my enquiry. Nicholas Davey in his conclusion to the chapter “Art and
Theoria” highlights the “epiphanic dimension of the experience of art.” He states “In so far as
artworks are singular renditions of the subject matters they invoke, works simultaneously point
beyond themselves and provide a site for that which is beyond them to come forth.”

This thesis is neither a survey of contemporary ephemeral art nor an attempt to create an alternative lineage
of transient works, but a scrutiny of a specific group of works which form a separate category of
ephemeral art. While other art works have been useful to me in my discussion of transient works
in general and clarifying the characteristics of different types of ephemeral arts, this core group
of works forms an imaginary exhibition that is both a journey through the aesthetic of transience
and also a journey through mourning. In this fictional exhibition, there are imagined visitors who
each encounter the exhibition based on their individual desires and experiences. The ‘beyond’
that this exhibition offers is an encounter with grief, sorrow, helplessness, pain, acceptance, love,
hope, and repair. It is equally possible to view it as a series of questions. What is ephemeral art?
Why do artists make ephemeral work? Why do art institutions spend money on works that will
disappear? What do ephemeral works do that permanent artworks do not? Does this group of
works have a quality in common that distinguishes them from other types of transient art? In this
thesis I will address both these lines of enquiry – the emotional journey offered by these works
and the philosophical questions raised. The role of permanent art and its institutional platform,

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2 Davey, N. “Art and Theoria” in Macleod, K. and Lin Holdridge. Think Through Art: reflections on art as research.
Oxon: Routledge, 2006 p. 36
the art museum, as means of creating a form of immortality is well documented, especially in the Western tradition. 3 Through this research I will examine the role of ephemerality as an acceptance of the opposite, decay and mortality.

In the preface to his book, *The Cultural Psychology of Self*, Ciaran Benson describes the ‘intellectual islands’, which isolate thinkers in one sphere of knowledge from other thinkers and other spheres. Benson attributes this isolation to the “volume of publications as much as the apparent incommensurability of perspectives and languages”. 4 Ernest Becker in his preface to the *Denial of Death* also addresses this subject, what he terms the “Babel of views”, and suggests that one of the motivating forces for his writing is “. . . Eros, the urge to the unification of experience, to form, to greater meaningfulness . . . a study in harmonization”. 5 In the process of researching this topic I have been struck by these separations and the need to explore my topic in the context of diverse disciplines to get an overview of the subject. These include art history, art theory, psychoanalytic theory, cultural theory, the psychology of grief and mourning, narratology and the cognitive psychology of anxiety and boredom. Given the fact that a distinct area of enquiry that relates ephemeral art to mourning does not exist, and that references have been drawn from these various “intellectual islands”, it is more appropriate to deal with the literature as its particular point of relevance arises. Rather than including a specific chapter that outlines a literature review, the texts that have been investigated are integrated into the body of the thesis.

As my discussion of ephemeral art addresses many of the assumptions about the nature of the knowledge that is available to us through art, it also seemed appropriate that this research should address the form in which this knowledge is presented.

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into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing to what is being known, and [that] this coefficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge. 6

Undertaking a project as expensive in terms of time and commitment as a PhD, requires a degree of personal engagement as described by Polanyi. Formal devices, such as the conventions of academic writing can act as a defence mechanism against, or a method of concealing that personal, indeed passionate, engagement. Rather than disguise my personal involvement with this subject and deny the importance of my position as commentator, I have chosen to present some of the information in an engaged manner and write directly from my own experience, not just of producing ephemeral art but also of the mourning which gave rise to it. To the extent the intuition is the synthesis of different forms of knowing, the instinct and intellect as described by Bergson, the overarching methodology of this thesis could be described as intuitive. 7 Nicholas Davey also address a unified approach to the experience and discussion of art works, he states “Theoria insists that knowledge of art must remain primarily experiential, acquired by acquaintance and participation rather than by theoretical abstraction. Theoria devotes itself to articulating the particular syntheses of idea and sense embodied in an artwork.” 8

The engaged form of writing I have chosen to adopt is often described as confessional, usually with negative connotations of lack of rigour. I suggest that this is a misunderstanding of the nature of confession, both legal and religious, and rather than being viewed as self-indulgence it should be read in terms situated knowledge. It is also a critique of the artificial rational/subjective dichotomy embedded in our Cartesian inheritance. To echo the words of Peggy Phelan in her discussion of performative writing; ‘I [am] concerned by a persistent

7 To argue the case for Bergson’s theory or to discuss the contradictions within his writing would be a digression and there are numerous publications that deal with this subject. For a critique of Bergson’s theory of intuition see Landes, M. W. “A Suggested Interpretation of Bergson’s Doctrine of Intuition” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (Sep., 1924), pp. 450-462
8 Davey, N. “Art and Theoria” op cit. p.36
separation between critical imagination and creative imagination. Like Phelan, I wish to bring to critical theory 'a certain affective emotional force.' To this end, some of the concepts I wish to explore will be presented in the form of narrative. In the tradition of parable and fable, the distilled ideas expressed in this form can have an affective force that ‘information’ lacks.

Leslie Hunt provides a detailed argument of the affective possibilities of narrative in her article “Sentiment and Sympathy”. Hunt discusses the use of narrative as a form of argument and a means of ‘emotional persuasion’ that influences the intellect. The use of narrative can allow readers to access their own tacit knowledge. The relationship between tacit knowledge and narrative is explored in the area of knowledge management. Charlotte Linde in her essay “Narrative and Social Tacit Knowledge” describes this relationship as one of exemplification rather than description. While I will draw on these forms of more subjective knowledge, I will also draw upon the academic disciplines mentioned above, and bring their rigour to bear upon the ideas I derive from my reading and from my personal experience and that of others recounted in non-academic texts.

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10 ibid
11 Leslie Hunt provides a detailed argument of the effective possibilities of narrative in her article “Sentiment and Sympathy” in The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 62:4 2004. She concludes -“Sometimes ignorance is wiser. Our vision of the world is the better for some judicious editing.”
12 Hunt defines the conventional use of tacit knowledge as “opposed to explicit knowledge,... knowledge which cannot be explicitly represented.” Within her field of knowledge management it refers to “any form of non-quantifiable knowledge, particularly knowledge of social interactions, social practices...” p 160
13 The accessing of tacit knowledge could be described as the end result of the application of intuition, and intuition as the means of accessing subconscious knowledge. The relationship between tacit knowledge and intuition is described by Michel Polanyi (op. cit.) among others. There is significant discussion of these in the area of education, most particularly the education of health care professionals.
15 Katherine Sutherland in her article “Of Milk and miracles: Nursing, the life drive, and subjectivity”, Frontiers 1999, discuss the anxiety related to integrating one’s maternal experiences into academic writing. Sutherland begins her article with an explanation/apology/warning about the decision to adopt this strategy. The need for an apology/explanation in these circumstances is interesting and revealing and has been echoed consistently in the preambles to many conference papers given on the subject of mourning where the speaker invariably mentions the impetus for their research being a personal experience of loss.
There are risks associated with this strategy. Alan Bleakley outlines the danger inherent in the subjective approach to writing; the possibility of failure to ‘interrogate their epistemological underpinning’ and perception being distorted by narcissism.\(^{16}\) Bleakley’s article “Writing with Invisible Ink: narrative, confessionalism and reflective practice”, outline the various arguments for and against the use of narrative as a tool in academic writing. He describes academic writing as ‘conservative, [and] resisting innovation’ and emphasises the ‘quasi-scientific conventions’ that proliferate in this form of communication. He also describes the opposite ‘where writing as reflexive practice turns to examine subjectivities and identities, the privileged genre appears to be personal-confessional, with its introspective gaze, and anecdotal, value-laden expression’.\(^{17}\) He continues by quoting Schon who suggests that “it turns the familiar into the strange, problematising the habitual, and challenging and subverting naturalised assumption’, and like Hunt argues that this form of writing enables the accessing of ‘tacit knowledge’.\(^{18}\) The term ‘anecdotal’, referring to a narrative of a relevant, resonant individual experience, would not be problematic if it were not for the aspiration to a version of objectivity derived from the material sciences as the privileged form of engagement in academic writing. When anecdote is used in the scientific arena it is to describe something untested and usually preceded by the word ‘merely’. However the anecdotal is not just something that is not yet tested but may well be something un-testable and rather than being unreliable evidence may well show us the limits of a system of knowledge that demands a particular form of testing which may not be appropriate to the given circumstances. This is very well illustrated by Hugh Raffles in his article “Intimate Knowledge”. Raffles, an anthropologist, describes two incidents where scientific studies were set up to ‘discover’ what was already well known locally. He states:

\(^{17}\) ibid
Anti-hegemonic knowledge remains broadly invisible in scientific circuits because few researchers thought to ask the questions by which it might be elicited. Scientific projects tended to be framed by existing theoretical paradigms and from limited conceptual repertoire readily available at any historical and institutional moment. This argument is not a devaluing of the scientific method but an assertion that it is important to use a methodology appropriate to the subject under investigation.

The risks in adopting a narrative approach are acknowledged as well as the obvious danger of attempting to generalise from a small sample. However, I view this risk as a challenge, which requires a constant negotiation and conversation between the two styles of writing I have adopted. This approach is consistent with my argument that the works that are the focus of this research require an emotional engagement as well as a detached critical evaluation to be fully experienced. To discuss these works in purely formal terms would do them a disservice which would verge on evasion. Guy Brett, in the opening paragraph of “Life Strategies: Overview and Selection” states:

To write about “live art,” performance, action, participation, surely requires an attentiveness towards the complexity of life itself, its flux, its tendency to exceed systems and dogmas. In a paradoxical way, to write about this subject requires an admission of the partiality of one’s viewpoint and knowledge, at the same time as an acceptance of the validity of one’s subjective history and lived experience.

The use of formal devices to avoid emotional engagement is not merely the province of academic writing but pervades institutions of all kinds and is consistent with the fear of tenderness, which I will discuss at length. There are many writers who have embraced the biographical and the narrative within their critical writing, Michel Foucault stated:

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20 The conversation between artwork, narrative and academic text has developed into a separate strand of enquiry, which is explored in a conference paper “Here, “I” am”, presented at Camberwell College of Art. 2006
In a sense, I have always wanted my books to be fragments from an autobiography. My books have always been my personal problems with madness, with prisons, with sexuality . . . each of my works is a part of my own biography.  

This thought is echoed by Adam Phillips who, responding to a question by Antoinette Brinkman about the autobiographical nature of writing and research, states;

There is always a sense in which one feels chosen by one’s subjects. I always assume that my preoccupations are a form of autobiography, that these topics are selected because they matter to me or because they are a medium for finding out what matters to me.  

Rather than viewing narrative and autobiographical element as confessional I view them as ‘writing out of the body’; the same body that experiences art and mourning, the body that both feels the pain of loss and understands the theoretical underpinning of academic writing about grief. This is not a divided body of heart and mind, but an integrated one, whose thinking is informed by a vast array of experiences. Confessions on the other hand can be compulsory or extracted; they are often not given willingly. Confession gives information we would rather others did not know. They are not sharing information, they are ‘made’ and have consequences, resulting in loss of liberty or punishment. Confession also suggests culpability, and is concerned with attributing blame.

The origin of the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of a disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, to have been thrown outside. To have acquired all of a sudden the feeling of something precious, rare, mortal. To have to find

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22 Macey, D. The Lives of Michel Foucault. London: Hutchenson, 1993 p xii
23 Brinkman, A. “Q&A: Adam Phillips”, Library Journal.com
24 This decision to adopt this strategy is not new, but has been argued for by numerous feminist theorists such as Helene Cixous, Lucy Irigaray, Hannah Arendt, and Joanna Freuh among others.
25 Rather than digress into an exploration of the literature relating to confessional practices I have included a piece of writing, I Confess, to illustrate the relationships involved in confession. These relationships are power based and involve a party who has authority over another. Both in the legal and religious sense one confesses to an ‘authority’. Rather than being confessional narrative writing can be a relationship unconcerned with power but based on sharing knowledge in a form that can enhance the material being shared.
again, urgently, an entrance, breath, to keep the trace. We have to make the apprenticeship of Mortality. 26

Adriana Cavarero in Relating Narratives: storytelling and selfhood, question the mythos/logos divide and suggests that narrative is a genre beyond this dichotomy and is not constrained by it. The experiences I describe are not divided into traditionally academic and personal, but are understood as all originating in the personal; be it the exhilaration of discovering an insightful text which illuminates a philosophical issue or a personal experience which validates a phenomenon known, but until that point never really understood. In Polanyi’s The Tacit Dimension, he elaborates his theory of tacit knowledge and states that: “we can know more than we can tell”. The validity of this insight has been reinforced in the course of my research as I repeatedly encountered texts that articulated ideas and experiences which up until that point I had never verbalised. This process of recognition is mirrored in the responses I have had to presentations of my research at conferences. The unsolicited stories individuals tell, usually to me alone rather than to the wider audience, of their experiences of mourning are not documented in any methodical form other than through my recollection and so are anecdotal. In the moment of telling they testify to the secret nature of this group, the bereaved, and the power of the works I describe to elicit these stories. My experience of these responses are that they are spontaneous and exist in a gift relationship rather than as subject and observer and are acts of recognition and are gestures of sharing. These are not confessional but are testimony in the sense of bearing witness, witness to the truth expressed in the artworks I discuss, which are also works of testimony and witness.

Narratives play an important role in this dissertation and exists on several levels. There are the narratives told by the works themselves but more importantly there are the narratives the artists offer alongside the art. All of the works that are discussed in the second half of this

dissertation are accompanied by narratives of mourning. Significantly the bereavements they refer to are untimely or traumatic deaths. The 'discovery' of these narratives changed the course of this research and confirmed my initial hunch that there was more being communicated in ephemeral art than the literature suggested. Alongside these initiatory narratives are those of the viewers; the narratives I offer to exemplify the experience of viewing; and the narratives told to me in response to my discussion of the works.

While Linde's study is in a very particular context – the transmission of knowledge in organisations through narrative, her research highlights several aspects of narrative that have a bearing on my research. In her case study Linde demonstrates the benefit to organisations of the transmission of knowledge through both informal and formal narrative and under these circumstances questions whether it would be reasonable for organisations to collate these stories as a resource. However, she suggests that the cataloguing of stories is ineffective – 'there is a fundamental flaw in the capturing of oral stories in a static archive'. She argues that story-telling is an active engagement between the teller and the person to whom the story is told. In an archive this relationship does not exist. This argument is reinforced in theories of conversation analysis in their discussion of 'recipient design'. Recipient design is a term used in ethnomethodology and refers to the fact that natural speech is designed to suit a particular listener in a particular context. When archived, this active element in story telling is removed. Like ephemeral art, stories exist in the moment of telling and require an engagement from the viewer/listener. Linde's concept of the archive as a form of stagnation that neutralises the knowledge available through narrative may well be true if our view of the archive is as a fixed repository of stories. However, I suggest that the archive can also be seen as dynamic and existing in the retelling of stories either in verbal form or as narrative texts.

Elizabeth Grosz, in her article "The Time of Violence; Deconstruction and Value" discusses violence with particular reference to the work of Jacques Derrida. Grosz focuses on hidden violence, "where it is less obvious, and rarely called by this name, in the domain of
knowledge, reflection, thinking, and writing."\textsuperscript{27} The problematising of narrative, the reduction of the gift to a form of commodity exchange, and the misinterpretation as confessional of the use of personal experience as evidence, are forms of violence, which dismisses and silences the speaker as effectively as a physical gag.

It is my hope that this subjective research, this narrative of discovery, may be useful to others in their understanding of Ephemeral Art and its relationship to mourning.

\textsuperscript{27} Grosz, E. "The Time of Violence. Deconstruction and Value" \textit{Cultural Values} Vol. 2, No. 2 1998
Introduction

Ephemeral:

1. a. Of diseases: Beginning and ending in a day. b. Of insects, flowers, etc.: Existing for one day only, or for a very few days.

2. a. In more extended application: That which is in existence, power, favour, popularity, etc. for a short time only; short-lived; transitory.¹

All of the possibilities for the meaning of the word ephemeral offered by the Oxford English Dictionary focus on endings; the fugitive, fleeting, impermanent, momentary, fickle, passing, perishable, throwaway and transient. Moreover, all have to a greater or lesser degree a connotation of valuelessness. Things that do not last are merely ephemeral. Rather than focus on the ending I will concentrate on what is happening when the ephemeral exists. Those things which are ephemeral can have a particular value precisely because they are ephemeral. A red summer sunset after a long hot day, a flock of birds swooping over shallow water, the smell of one’s baby, the particles of dust caught in a shaft of sunlight, the taste of raspberries, can have an intensity, a preciousness, which would be destroyed by permanence.

Not only can the ephemeral be physically elusive it can also be elusive in language. The word ephemeral is often applied loosely when what is being described belongs to the general category to which everything belongs, even our planet, rather than to a distinct group of things that are Ephemeral. In a recent article “Contemporary Art and Conservation theory” Dr. Hiltrud

Schinzel refers to “so-called Ephemeral Art.” The Oxford English dictionary distinguishes between the uses of unhyphenated “so called” from the hyphenated form. It defines “so-called” as “In attributive use (hyphened): Called or designated by this name or term, but not properly entitled to it or correctly described by it.” This confusion of attribution pervades much of the discussion of ephemeral art, and for that reason a significant proportion of this research is devoted to the development of a definition of the term.

This dissertation is divided into two sections. The first part is primarily concerned with definition and identifying the specific qualities of the ephemeral. This will involve drawing together elements that may initially appear unrelated such as boredom, Zen philosophy, and artistic intentionality, but thinking about these areas will help to create an aesthetic of the ephemeral that will lay the foundations for a discussion of specific ephemeral artworks in the chapters that follow.

The working definition of ephemeral art that I have developed to enable me to focus on a particular group of artworks is

\[
\text{Ephemeral Art} = \text{communicative act} + \text{inherent vice (directive intent)}
\]

In the first four chapters, I will examine each of these characteristics - time, communicative act, inherent vice, and directive intent - in turn, to demonstrate how ephemeral art is the interplay between them.

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From the OED definition we can surmise that the ephemeral is the existence of a thing or an event in a contained or limited time. Using this I can begin to develop a definition as it relates to art. This definition would include not just art works that are ephemeral, but in fact, all artworks, as all artworks exist in time. Even with the intervention of conservators, all art works deteriorate over time, though at such a slow pace that they appear 'permanent', but this does not mean all works are ephemeral art. This indicates that there is something specific about the relationship between the artwork and time for ephemeral work. Fundamental to an understanding of ephemeral art then is the experience of time within works where time is often both the subject and the means of communication. In chapter 1, the functioning of time within ephemeral art will be explored through a detailed examination of the experience of boredom. Boredom is important because it provides an acute experience of the passage of time; and because for many the experience of viewing ephemeral art, a pile of sweets being depleted or some fruit rotting, can in itself be a boring process. This investigation will establish two fundamental aspects of ephemeral art, that it is a process in time and that it requires a quality of attention beyond the act of looking. Both of these aspects begin to suggest a form of engagement that offers a reading of transience beyond a merely oppositional form of protest art. I will also begin to establish the relationship between the ephemeral and mourning, a thread that will run throughout the first half and be elaborated further in part two.

In writing about works of art there are several groups of terms available to describe the focus of the discussion. In contemporary art the medium-specific terms - drawing, painting, and sculpture
may no longer be helpful as many works do not fit neatly into one of these fields, and the more general term ‘art object’ is frequently used. In locating the precise meaning of art-related terms and identifying an appropriate vocabulary to describe ephemeral art the work of John Dewey has been invaluable. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey refers to the ‘expressive objects’. He states:

Works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvellous aids in the creation of such a life. The remaking of the material of experience in the act of expression is not an isolated event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work. In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity.

Dewey’s description of the work of art as something that art does rather than the object itself, and his view that the work somehow embraces external elements such as the community in which the work is made is significant in the development of my terminology. In the definition of ephemeral art developed here I will use the term ‘communicative act’ which retains many of the connotations of Dewey’s ‘expressive object’ but has an additional element which is important for my analysis. Communicative act is a term used in communication analysis and Speech Act Theory and refers not only to the words one says but also to the context, and importantly to the way one says them. In relation to ephemeral art, this term then is a deliberate attempt to highlight the distinction between the meaning of an object and what is communicated in the act of moving towards disappearance in the presence of the viewer. If the meaning is seen to reside entirely in the physical static object, the non-tangible aspects of the work are at risk of being neglected. In ephemeral art the significance of the piece resides in just this element of the work, and not in the object but in its disappearance. Like the stories described in the preface it is in the telling and the unfolding of a work over time rather than in the words that the story exists.

“Communicative act” allows for the inclusion of acts and gestures that are so slight and evanescent that they may not have much physical presence at all - a yawn, a whisper, a nudge - or elements that are not a consistent part of the work e.g. the weather, the site, or viewer participation. Distinguishing between the meaning of a physical object and what is communicated by its disappearance or decay, highlights the risk of privileging the maintenance of the physical object over the knowledge if its disappearance. However by focusing on what is communicated rather than on the physicality of the artwork allows for an existence beyond the

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1 Dewey, J. *Art as Experience* New York: Pedigree Books 1980
physical, which is imperative if the knowledge of these works is to survive their limited temporal existence.

The nature of the materials used to create works of art and their relationship to the content of art has changed significantly in the 20th century from those which prevailed in previous centuries. In Chapter 2, this relationship will be examined and the works that are the focus of this research will be set in a historical context. To explore the impact of an appreciation of transience on art practice; I will explore the history of a specific point of contact between eastern philosophy and western art and the impermanent art which was created in the west in response to the eastern tradition of appreciating the fleeting. This suggests that the obsession with permanence derives from cultural conditioning and is not a universal characteristic of human nature. I will focus on the significant encounter between east and western art, which took place in the 1960s, in particular the influence of Zen Buddhism on John Cage, and his influence, on the group of artist that attended his classes. I will briefly outline the Japanese philosophy of wabi sabi, and explore how elements of the sense of the world it embodies seeped into western art. I will look at the influence of Buddhism on the work of Allan Kaprow, focusing on his philosophy as expressed in Assemblage, Environment, and Happenings.

One of the themes that has been the focus of my research is that of motivation. Why would an artist make ephemeral art? I have also applied that same enquiry to the other areas I have encountered along the way and found this to be useful in developing an understanding of the underlying relationship between ephemerality and philosophies that appear to have influenced a growing interest in transience. Rather than viewing Buddhism as a route to an appreciation of transience I will explore why Buddhism was so appealing to artists in the 1960s and suggest the possibility that these two interests were responses to the same desire to find alternative forms of meaning and expression in response to historical circumstances of the time.
The shift from art object to communicative act posed a series of challenges for art institutions and this will be discussed in Chapter 3. The term ‘inherent vice’ is used in the insurance industry to describe the risk of a ‘loss caused by the inherent nature of the thing insured and not a result of a casualty or external cause’. When art works are destroyed by fire or flood, this does not constitute an inherent vice, as the destruction was because of an unforeseen external cause. These events may cause us to reflect on the vulnerability of the things we consider durable but they are extrinsic to the work. However, when the burning or washing away of the work is an intrinsic element of the piece, then it is an ephemeral artwork. The inherent vice does not necessarily have to be the result of the materials used, but can be related to the site, the participation of the public or the meaning of the work. The Paper Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres are not in themselves ephemeral but could be part of a permanent collection, except that the work is created by the removal of sheets from the shack. In this case, the inherent vice is the participation of the public. 

In order to develop my definition of ephemeral art I will distinguish between works that are temporary and those that are ephemeral through an examination three art works, Helen Chadwick’s Cacao (1994), Rachel Whiteread’s House (1993), and Eva Hesse’s Expanded Expansion (1969), which allow me to explore the various forms of decay that can exist within an artwork and the relationship between the temporal aspects of the work and its meaning.

Focusing on Eve Hesse’s work provides an interesting example of accidentally ephemeral art. From 1967, Hesse chose to work with Latex rubber and the following year she introduced fibreglass into her repertoire of materials. She chose to use these materials in her sculpture for their expressive poetic qualities not because these materials would eventually disintegrate. When Hesse was made aware of the instability of the materials she had chosen she decided to continue using them. These works are now the subject of debate in the conservation world, concerning the point at which they are no longer exhibitable. In November 2000, the organizers of an exhibition of her work convened a discussion among curators, conservators, and Hesse’s friends to discuss the problems involved the exhibiting of her work. One of the pieces viewed in the course of the discussion was Expanded Expansion (1969), a fibreglass, latex, and

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4 Gonzalez-Torres' made a series of paper stacks that begin their 'life' as a solid block on the gallery floor reminiscent of the monumental minimalism of Donald Judd and Carl Andre. However, the gallery visitors are invited to remove and keep a sheet from the pile gradually eroding its minimal austerity.
cheesecloth piece. The translucent latex-coated cheesecloth section is draped between more rigid fibreglass supports. The work leant against the wall. The work is now rigid and darkly discoloured and cannot be removed from its crate for fear of further damage. It no longer has any of the qualities it originally had and merely acts as a reminder of what it once was and what has been lost. One of the issues raised was how to determine what Hesse would accept in the way of deterioration were she still alive. The material available about Hesse’s work and the remarks she is reported to have made in conversation, suggest that she was sympathetic to the idea of transience and that she would have been happy with the ephemeral nature of her work. However, this is just supposition, we do not know for a fact. Hesse may not have started out with the deliberate intention to create an ephemeral work but once made aware of the inherent vulnerability of the materials she was using, she continued to use them. Like Hesse, many artists produce work using materials that suit their intentions at the time of making without considering the long term durability of the work, while not specifically engaging with ephemerality.

When art becomes the property of an art institution, its long-term fate is decided by conservators. Given the nature of their profession, it requires a philosophical and ethical shift to accommodate the decay and ultimate disappearance inherent in ephemeral work. In this chapter I will also examine the institutional response to works that possess an ‘inherent vice’, and the art institution’s requirement for permanence through an examination of the Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums and the various strategies employed by institutions to accommodate works that intentionally transgress this requirement. There are also legal issues relating to the treatment of artworks and, while we live in an age of an international art world, the resolution of these issues can vary between countries.

Having established that ephemeral art possess an inherent vice I will also look at the possibility that a makers of ephemeral art may experience a form of decay in relation to their career and posthumous reputation.

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5 Hesse discussed the vulnerability of her work in an interview with Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, New York: 1975
In chapter 4, I will deal with the thorny issue of intentionality with particular reference to directive intent. The issue of intention has particular consequence for ephemeral art works when they are acquired by a museum or collection. Without the inclusion of 'directive intent', a term borrowed from John Dewey, who uses it to distinguish between the creations of animals and those of human beings, the artist’s desire that a work should decay might not be known to the holding or exhibiting institution. This highlights the fact that intentions alone are not sufficient in communicating with an audience but require transmission. The artist communicates their intention through various means, one of which is the artwork itself. Equally, an artist's intentions are not always fixed and can change and develop along with the work, particularly when the work itself is changing. I will explore ‘directive intent’ through a discussion of a work by Canadian artist Liz Magor, *Time and Mrs Tiber* (1976). This work is particularly interesting because it is part of a ‘study collection’ rather than the permanent collection, illustrating my argument that institutions require a category shift to accommodate ephemeral works. Focusing on the correspondence between the National Gallery of Canada and Liz Magor I will trace the changes and development of the artist’s intentions as communicated to the gallery. This work also illustrates the difficulty determining when an ephemeral work has ‘ended’ and the complications associated with works that may eventually require deaccessioning. This work can be read not only of a work of mourning but the imminent demise of the work itself is mourned.

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6 Dewey, J. *op. cit.* p. 24. This is an argument which Dewey returns to on p. 49.
The phrase 'inherent vice' betrays the revulsion for the impermanent, which is commonly part of our language, where ephemerality is viewed as a fatal flaw. In much the same way that it is necessary to understand attachment to have an understanding of loss, in order to understand ephemerality it is necessary to understand our attachment to the opposite – permanence, and its function not only in art, but in our culture generally. All of the literature I have looked at suggests that as a culture we require our art to be durable, and collectable. This requirement includes but goes beyond the economic demands of the art market and the need of art institutions to possess artworks as a form of cultural propaganda. In Chapter 5, I will look at our cultural need for permanence with a view to arriving at an understanding of the difficulty posed by transience. As can be seen from the example of Magor's Time and Mrs Tiber, allowing works to cease to exist is a complex process which highlights the relationships between the work and the various people involved. It also hints at their perception of the consequences of the passage of time. In the second half of this dissertation, I will establish the relationship between ephemerality and mourning, beginning with an exploration of the need for permanence and the consequences of an engagement with transience. This will be examined from an economic, psychological and social perspective, providing a foundation for an understanding of the perception of transience in general and ephemeral art in particular.

The difficulty that transience poses for our culture will be explored from diverse perspectives, in particular Michael Thompson's 'Rubbish Theory' and how we react when those things that should be permanent are damaged or destroyed. Thompson's theory explains the mechanisms of the category system of durable and transient, but it does not completely explain why we require durability. For an understanding of our relationship with permanence and impermanence I will turn to psychoanalysis. Freud offered a positive view of transience and change while acknowledging the difficulty of living with mortality. Beginning with his essay "On Transience" I will discuss the aversion to impermanence and the corresponding attachment to permanence as a form of death denial. From Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" we can read ephemeral art as 'griefwork' and witness the obsessive remembering associated with mourning unfolding in these works. Ernest Becker's development of Freud's theory in The Denial of Death and Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski's "Terror Management Theory" show how the accumulation of art functions as a form of death denial and contributes to our worldview of permanence and stability.

Much of contemporary attachment theory is based on the studies of John Bowlby, who thought attachment is one of the main driving forces behind human existence. See Bowlby Attachment and Loss (1973)
Given the pressure from the art institutions which, in their governing rules are obliged to acquire works that are conservable and can be passed on to future generations, and given the need for a body of work to establish a career and a reputation during and after the artist’s lifetime, why would an artist make ephemeral work? For some artists the creation of transient work is a reflection of the desire to dematerialise the art object, the democratisation of art, or a challenge to the institution. Some of these motivations may be involved in the creation of what I have defined as ephemeral art, but the answer to this question may not be found solely in the art world but in an understanding of the relationship between ephemerality, mourning, and loss.

Finally in this Chapter I will discuss an even more vulnerable aspect of ephemeral art. Not only are these objects moving towards disappearance but also, because of the characteristic described - communicative act, inherent vice, directive intent and the experience of works in time - there is the possibility that the meaning of these works may also be lost.

Having outlined my field of enquiry, established a terminology, discussed the philosophical and psychological questions raised by ephemerality, Chapter 6 will focus on particular ephemeral communicative acts. I will discuss Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (1992-1997), Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ Candy Spills (from 1990), and my own work, In Memory (2004). These are memory works in two senses. First, they create a situation in which the obsessive remembering associated with mourning takes place, the memory work of the artist; and second, these works exist in memory, the memory work of the viewer. I will explore the hypothesis that the motivation to produce ephemeral works is related to experiences of bereavement and in particular, untimely death and what has been called disenfranchised grief. Gonzalez-Torres and Leonard were working against the background of the AIDS epidemic in America in the 1980s, which, like other catastrophic events, such as the First and Second World Wars and the Holocaust, resulted in untimely deaths on a vast scale. The experience of untimely death - death outside the natural order of things, i.e. the oldest generation dies first, our parents die before us and we die after our children have grown and they themselves have children - forces a confrontation with transience. These works involve a struggle with grief and to some degree at least, an acceptance of that transience. I include my own work, which reflects on the loss of the memory of a loved one, not simply as an example of an ephemeral artwork made in response to a bereavement, but because it was through that work that I was able to develop my thinking in relation to ephemeral art. It also highlighted for me many of the practical difficulties involved in making and exhibiting a work that engages with the transient as a means of communication.
In Chapter 7, I will concentrate on works by Dadang Christanto and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook which engage more literally with the dead. I will discuss these with reference to Julia Kristeva’s essay *Powers of Horror* and contemporary theories of mourning especially the works of John Bowlby, and Colin Murray Parkes. From Geoffrey Gorer we can begin to see how taboos around the subject of mourning have developed and become embedded in the culture and from this appreciate the even more subtle taboo against attempting seriously to address the issue of love. Love, mourning, and storytelling will also be explored through the web-based work of Barbara Campbell. Finally, I will look at recent research on the psychology of empathy and how a viewer may engage with these works. Through this exploration, I will discuss the possibility that ephemeral art works can function as rituals once did to ameliorate the state of both the mourner and the corpse and offer a possibility of moving through abjection.

The final section of the chapter is written as a narrative using the pronoun of the first person plural. The use of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ is an acknowledgement that this work has not been a solo exercise but has been helped and encouraged by numerous others who have shared their wisdom, knowledge, and experience with me. “We”, rather than being an abdication of ownership of the material, represents a desire to include the reader/listener. It can refer to you and me, and also to tribes to which one belongs. Our tribes are no longer merely formed by the cultural group into which we were born but are those with whom we share experiences and identifications. They are numerous and fluid.

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8 Particularly *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*, By Colin Murray Parkes and John Bowlby’s *Attachment and Loss*. 
Time To Dream
or
on the benefit of being bored

Dream Song 14
Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
We ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
Means you have no

Inner Resources.’ I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
Literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
As bad as Achilles,
Who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.

John Berryman

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In *The Psychology of Time*, Paul Fraisse tells us that we are only aware of time when it appears distorted, moving either too quickly or too slowly. This is the case with much of human experience; it is only when something is not right that we consciously experience it. In order to understand our perception of time I will explore boredom, which is an acute experience of time. In this chapter I will trace a line between boredom, waiting, and mourning. If we measure time by events or activities, boredom, waiting, and mourning may be experienced as dead time, when nothing happens. These are not periods in which time is arrested; one can be acutely aware of the passage of time while bored or waiting. In mourning one can have an intense sense of the unidirectional quality of time: there is no going back. However in boredom, mourning and waiting, time can become distorted. In *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Auge defines non-places; “If a place can be identified as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” In a cartography of emotions the temporal dislocation we experience in the ‘non-places’ of boredom, waiting and mourning could be described as ‘non-time’. “In ‘non place’ all of the events and relations that structure experience and underlie history disappear over the horizon: they are a fleeting trace.” In a similar way, in non-time the experience of meaning embedded in the flow of time in which we are immersed evaporates.

To begin, I would like to highlight some important characteristics of boredom, and then relate these to the experience of viewing works that can appear to slow time. Ephemeral Art can often encompass activity which is very boring to watch such as fruit decaying, flowers withering or ice melting, processes which are imperceptible in real time and can leave the viewer waiting for something to happen. These everyday occurrences of decay take place in our fridges and living rooms and we would rarely consider watching them. Transferred to a gallery and incorporated into works of art does not make them inherently more interesting, but serves to highlight boredom as a strategy that can provoke an acute experience of time and while simultaneously rejecting traditional notions of the aesthetic and the valuable. My main interest

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2 Fraisse, P. *The psychology of time*, New York: Harper & Row 1963
4 Collins, S. ‘Head Out on the Highway: Anthropological Encounters with the Supermodern’ *Postmodern Culture* vol 7 no 1 1996
here is why an artist would adopt such a risky strategy. I will explore the possibility that the non-
time created by Ephemeral Art is a reflection of the dislocation of bereavement.

Adam Phillips in *On Kissing Tickling and Being Bored* also quotes from the John
Berryman poem I have used as an epigraph for this chapter. He quotes the first line – ‘Friends,
life is boring.’ to introduce a discussion about the capacity for being bored as an essential
precursor to creativity. However, it is a later section that is most relevant to my concerns –
‘Ever to confess you’re bored means you have no inner resources’ – which contains an element
of blame and guilt. Berryman’s use of the verb ‘to confess’ rather than ‘to say’ suggests this is
an admission of a flaw or sin which strengthens the sense of guilt.

Boredom as a concept emerged in the late 18th Century, making its first dictionary
appearance in 1777. Thus boredom is both a culturally generated and recent phenomenon, one
whose emergence is of such significance that it, and cognate states such as ennui, have been
described as “the malaise of modernity.” Boredom is not intrinsic to an object, event, or person;
it is a feeling experienced as a consequence of a relationship between a person and an event,
object or another, and as a result, it is a matter of perception and is highly subjective. The
increase in awareness of boredom developed in parallel to the emergence of the concept of
leisure and also the notions of the autonomous individual and individual rights, for a society
which was industrializing, urbanizing and within which traditional roles of family and
community were being altered with increasing rapidity. It is significant that in the wake of the
massive destruction of World War II, one seminal theatrical work that influenced visual artists as
well as other dramatists was Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. This funny bleak work, a
study of boredom, was summarised by Beckett scholar Vivian Mercier as a play in which
“nothing happens, twice”. Does the right to the pursuit of happiness carry with it an element of
the expectation of a right to be entertained? According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, prior to
modern times whether an activity was boring or not was of no consequence. As the experience
and awareness of boredom (and the measures which people take to keep it at bay) are on the
increase, coupled with the fact that we are all living longer, the necessity for an understanding of
boredom becomes all the greater.

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5 Dictionaire of the French Academy
The fact that Berryman also tells us that his mother warned against revealing the absence of inner resources (and presumably against the lack itself) suggests a harsh regime—a reflection of a culture of childrearing where the task of the young person was to submit to improvement and education, not to be happy and amused. But Berryman’s admissions comes from an adult—despite the infantilizing judgment, he is accepting responsibility for his boredom, and for his lack of inner resources. This is what is expected of adults. At what age does boredom cease to be a marker of an important developmental stage as described by child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and become evidence of a lack of inner resources which it is an adult’s task to replenish? Many of the works consulted on the subject of boredom start with a tale of the writer’s own childhood experiences of boredom or observations of their young patients or students. This is not because young people have a monopoly on being bored but when we observe boredom in children, we seem to see pure boredom. I recall when my son, at the age of six discovered boredom. His boredom wasn’t anything special, it was however his first conscious encounter with it and it was a surprise, a shock. It was pure unadulterated boredom and he had never before been driven to cry out in bewilderment ‘Mum I’m bored’. He experienced his boredom as akin to pain; it was physical and disturbing. As far as he was concerned up until that point his life had been ‘ok’ and now it was broken; and because he didn’t have a memory of overcoming this difficulty, he felt that things were never to be the same again. He had tasted the bitter apple, not of knowledge but of boredom, and been flung out of Eden. I resisted the urge to tell him that Winnicott said that the capacity to be bored represents a developmental achievement in which he will learn to develop desire and that being a good enough mother I will not sabotage this opportunity by offering him a way out of his boredom. This he must learn for himself and, unfortunately, in the mean time there is the ‘Gameboy’, which provides an addictive displacement.

Boredom is inextricably linked to time—the German word for boredom is Langeweile which translated literally means ‘a long time’. A significant aspect of boredom is the apparent distortion of time, which appears to stand still, a characteristic boredom shares with anxiety, shock, traumatic experiences and, as I will show, Ephemeral Art. Dunbar, a character in Joseph Heller’s novel of the Second World War, Catch 22, attempts to capitalise on boredom’s timelessness as a strategy for dealing with the constant threat of death.

Dunbar was lying motionless on his back again with his eyes staring up at the ceiling like a doll’s. He was working hard at increasing his life span. He did it by cultivating
boredom. Dunbar was working so hard at increasing his life span Yossarian thought he was dead.⁷

Dunbar’s other strategies include filling his time with periods of discomfort in the company of people he dislikes and performing activities he hates. A single hour spent like this could, in his words, be worth “eleven-times-seventeen years”.⁸

This absence of significant time markers, the never-ending-ness of it is one of the major characteristics of boredom and the most significant cause of boredom-related distress. Ironically, parallel to the unhappiness with and avoidance of boredom in our culture there is a desperate desire for immortality, which would in effect be never-ending-ness itself. Thus boredom offers us a glimpse of the danger forewarned in the folklore of many cultures – that of getting what we wish for. The painful experience of time standing still is a consequence of a sense of the absence of meaning. When one is engaged in a meaningless task or a task which offers no significant time markers, then it appears endless. There is also an experience of emptiness – dead boring. Being caught up in performing routine tasks is often described as ‘killing time’ or ‘dead time’ and the work itself ‘mindless’.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi tells us that boredom will occur when a person’s skills are greater than the opportunities for using them.⁹ When the opposite occurs i.e. when the task appears greater than a person’s capability the result will be anxiety. I would suggest that this kind of anxiety is in fact accompanied by a form of boredom. People frequently dismiss as boring things they do not understand or appreciate, whether this be opera or sport. If the experience is beyond their understanding people are not merely pretending that they find it boring. It in fact is boring because of the activity/capability gap. Further we cannot afford to be interested in everything all the time. We require a mechanism that will allow us to filter out the majority of information to enable us to focus on a few tasks. In his article ‘Theoretical Model for Enjoyment’ Csikszentmihalyi discusses the opposite of boredom – Flow - which can be described as the satisfying experience of total involvement in an activity. For instance, he describes play as the ‘flow experience par excellence.’¹⁰ In flow, there is unawareness of time –

⁸ ibid. p. 43.
¹⁰ ibid p. 37
‘How time flies when you’re having fun’. Significantly, he states that there are two ways of achieving the desirable state of flow when it is absent from a situation i.e. when one is bored - either decrease challenges or increase skill. However, as he points out what is important here is “the person’s ability to restructure the environment so that it will allow flow to occur’.11

Based on Csikszentmihalyi’s two options for a satisfying experience, good boredom happens when we have the opportunity to achieve flow or a satisfying experience by increasing our skills; and bad boredom the situation where a decrease is the only option available and where there is no option of learning improved skills. J M Barbalet, in his paper “Boredom and social meaning”, stresses the importance of boredom “not merely (to) register meaninglessness, but also (as) an imperative towards meaning.”12 Thus, boredom acts as a safeguard against itself. It prevents us from lying about in a state of torpor, and spurs us on to discover meaning. This would suggest an evolutionary benefit of boredom - boredom as a drive. There is also significant evidence that boredom does not always spur us on to beneficial creative activity but can also led to excessive risk-taking, e.g. gambling and inter-group conflict – ‘the devil finds work for idle hands’. J. T. Fraser in Time, Conflict, and Human Values (1999) highlights the relationship between our time-awareness, creativity, and our frightening destructiveness. This does not necessarily mean that we go to war as a result of boredom but on a small more localised level studies have shown that workers involved in meaningless tasks will create conflict, usually directed toward their managers, as a form of engagement.

Boredom is an individual experience and the things we describe as boring are as much an indicator of who we are, defined by a collection of the things we find interesting. Not only is boredom highly subjective but also the experience of duration is equally subjective. Paul Fraisse, quotes from Lavelle’s Du temps et de l’éternité “In its purest form the consciousness of time is boredom: that is, the consciousness of an interval which nothing crosses and which nothing can fill.”13 He also points out that while we are not very good at estimating how long something takes we are constantly making duration assessments. He concludes that our very understanding

11 ibid p. 53
of duration arises from a 'frustration of temporal origins'. We are only conscious of time when it appears too long. It is only when we are not preoccupied with time that it appears to go faster.

Joseph Heller describes boredom but does not seek to be boring in his writing. One of the significant aspects of a work of art is that generally you can choose to give it time or not. Outside formal education, a work of art rarely involves compulsory reading or viewing and so if it does not engage its audience then they are free to put the book down or walk past the piece of art. Social norms make it more difficult in theatres, concert halls and cinemas, but if you wish you can always leave. The artist may well be discussing boredom but the work itself had better be interesting. Why then would an artist risk making work that could be viewed as evoking boredom or even intentionally being boring?

James Elkins in his book *Pictures & Tears: A History of People who have cried in front of Paintings* explores the phenomenon of being moved to tears by a work of art. He does this from the standpoint of someone who has never cried in front of a painting. In fact he goes as far as to ask if one has to be ‘a little off in the head?’ to cry in front of paintings.¹⁴ Elkins attributes much of his/our being unmoved to our learnt Kantian response to art and suggests that ‘Art museums . . . teach viewers to look without feeling too much.’ It is not only art museums that require us not to feel: it is a far broader cultural phenomenon.

In 1935, I. D. Suttie first published his *Origins of Love and Hate* in which he discusses the “taboo on tenderness.” Suttie, contrary to Freud, states that “what we call tender feelings and affection are based not on sexual desire but upon the pre-oedipal emotional and fondling relationship with the mother and upon the instinctual need for companionship which is characteristic of all animals which pass through a phase of nurtured infancy.” According to Suttie the speed with which a child is required to ‘grow-up’ results in a “precipitate (d) ‘psychic parturition’, attended by an anxiety, acquisitiveness, and aggressiveness which is reflected in our culture and economics customs and attitude.”¹⁵ He suggests that the child’s feelings of tenderness are thwarted and it learns to associate these with the pain and grief resulting from the loss of the mother’s tenderness. Suttie makes an explicit link between the taboo on tenderness and boredom. He describes boredom as the opposite of enthusiasm and states the manifestation

of the taboo can be most clearly seen in areas of feeling or ‘meaning-interplay’ and appreciation and can be seen as an ‘inhibition which dulls the social responsiveness of the individual’.\(^\text{16}\) Simply put, as a result of our taboo on tenderness we are reluctant to engage with or find meaning in works of art which require us to engage on an emotional level. The resulting lack of engagement is experienced as boredom.

Before moving on I would like to extract some of the key aspects of boredom offered by this discussion that may be useful in understanding the experience of viewing art works and Ephemeral Art in particular. These aspects, lack of engagement, absence of meaning, anxiety, and endlessness are also closely related to the sensation of mourning. Boredom is a site of transition where – eventually - one moves from one desire to another. It can be a transformative space and its very neutrality can provide infinite possibilities. However, I would like to consider what happens when an individual does not move on, when boredom is chosen or is the only available possibility. Dunbar offers boredom as a strategy not just for making time pass more slowly but by doing so, he attempts to put off the inevitable. The experience of endlessness in boredom is in the main considered an anxiety inducing sensation, however, it can be preferable to the alternatives and be viewed as a refusal to engage with an uncertain future.

Csikszentmihalyi, Phillips, and Suttie demonstrate the link between boredom and engagement. Suttie offers a view of the lack of emotional engagement as a consequence of a fear of tenderness. In Csikszentmihalyi’s model, when faced with a boring situation which appears difficult or does not immediately yield a meaning or even a way into meaning, we then have two options. We can decrease the level of challenge. One strategy for doing this in relation to an artwork would be to dismiss the work as not very good. If the artist was communicating successfully, I would be able to understand the work and not be bored by it. The second option open to us is an increase in skill. In the context of viewing an artwork; this means doing the work the art requires to achieve meaningfulness. In these terms a work we experience as boring may either be not very good or it may offer us the opportunity to increase our skills. However there is another possibility not covered by Csikszentmihalyi. Boredom can occur when an individual is unable to engage with the world, not merely because of a lack of intellectual skill or emotional openness but because the challenge of simply being alive is too great. Phillips asks

\(^{16}\) ibid. p. 92
if it is possibly that “boredom is merely the mourning of everyday life?”\textsuperscript{17} It is this acute form of boredom and its relationship to mourning that I would now like to explore.

Berryman’s Dream Song provides a picture of his inability to engage with the world. Throughout the poem he catalogues his failures; his lack of inner resources, his disenchantment with the beauty of the world, his failure to appreciate people, great art, and literature. The fallen hero Achilles and his alter-ego Henry are reduced to whining characters with their “plights and gripes” and the poet himself is as slight and ephemeral as the wag of the tail of a long gone dog. This is a work without hope or consolation, in which not even gin offers an escape. It is not just a work of boredom but one in which he mourns the lost possibility of an engaged existence. The inability to engage is not merely stated but is also stylistically evident in what Jeffrey Triggs describes as the “angry dislocations of language. . . the refusal of syntax to come to rest”\textsuperscript{18} In other poems in the Dream Song series, Berryman gives clues as to the origins of his mourning. Not only does he make numerous references to the passing of ‘the greats’, his literary ancestors, but in Dream Song 76 he expresses his fear that his father, through his suicide when Berryman was almost twelve, also murdered him.

in a modesty of death I join my father
who dared so long agone leave me.
A bullet on a concrete stoop
close by a smothering southern sea
spreadyedged on an island by my knee.

The suicide is also referred to in Dream song 235

Save us from shotguns & fathers’ suicides.
It all depends on who you're the father of if you want to kill yourself-
a bad example, murder of oneself,
the final death, in a paroxysm of love


for which good mercy hides? . . .

Mercy! my father; do not pull the trigger
or all my life I'll suffer from your anger
killing what you began.

While Berryman at least offers a hint of the possibility of the engagement that eludes him, in Beckett even that possibility is denied. Beckett offers us a glimpse of a meaningless existence. In Waiting for Godot we see the pathological boredom alluded to by Adam Phillips who suggests that the risk of boredom in adults is that it can turn into waiting and eventually waiting for nothing. He ends his chapter with the warning that “Adulthood, one could say, is when it begins to occur to you that you may not be leading a charmed life.”

The Ephemeral Art works I will discuss in this thesis do not offer entertainment or conventional aesthetic enjoyment that can take pleasure in the evidence of the artist’s skill; in fact many of these works are particularly devoid of skill or can be seen as a failure of skill. In Time and Mrs Tiber, which is the focus of Chapter 4 Liz Magor demonstrates our failure to defy time through blackening preserves and in Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (for David) Chapter 6, we witness her failure to repair. Bersani and Dutoit state that the ‘arts of impoverishment’ which they discuss “train us in new modes of mobility (or modes to which we may have been blind).” I suggest that ephemeral works also require a new mode of mobility, an emotional movement towards the work that requires engagement. That engagement is one that requires an emotional abandonment to the work. They also require time, time to understand the meaning of the time of these works.

There is often something very real, very literal about conceptual art. If the artist wants the floor to look like it is covered with ground turmeric then they cover the floor with ground turmeric. There is a straight-forwardness that seems contradictory to the very notion of art. Conceptual art, and in particular ephemeral conceptual art, can often appear to lacks artfulness

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technical virtuosity. This is particularly true of several of the works that are the focus of this
study. Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (For David) for example, is a work comprised of what
appear to be pieces of fruit in various stages of decay, strewn on the floor of the gallery.21 This
work is in the long tradition of Vanitas paintings that are reminders of our mortality. In contrast
to, Taylor Wood’s Still Life (2001) is a film that has been speeded up to allow the rotten
fruit to be seen in 3min. 44sec, a time-span that could easily be taken in a single sitting. I saw
this work exhibited in the still life room of The Tate Modern where seats were provided, inviting
visitors to stay a while and witness the full event.

Sam Taylor Wood Still Life (2001)

No seats are provided to view the decay present in Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (For
David). And why would you provide seats to watch some fruit decay in real time? One could sit
for a long time without anything perceptible happening. One could go so far as to say this would
be boring. Leonard is an artist familiar with a variety of media. Her works have been described
as challenging and shocking even in some cases, pornographic, but never boring. This suggests a
deliberate use of boredom. Adam Philips describes boredom as ‘integral to the process of taking
time.’ Taylor Wood’s works have captured time; Zoe Leonard’s work is about time –
taking one’s time.

This work will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 6.
Like Leonard's piece, Anya Gallaccio's works *preserve 'beauty'* (1991-2003) and *because I could not stop* (2000), both shown as part of the Turner Prize Exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 2003, also included rotting vegetation. These works were exhibited for three months and over this time they gradually rotted. Despite the fact that these were unfolding over time there was no suggestion that one should sit and watch.

Unlike other works of visual art or in other media, it may not be necessary to view the entire duration of these pieces to understand or experience the work. The experience of a book or film could be significantly altered by not knowing the ending or missing a section of the plot. However, even though the works are constantly changing, however slowly, and what the viewer sees one day can be different from the next day, a part of the piece can indicate the whole. If ephemeral art can be said to embody time, then one piece of time is much the same as the next, making it unnecessary to view the entire duration of the piece. In fact, it is rarely possible to view the evolution of an ephemeral art piece, as visitors are usually restricted to viewing at a single opening time. While it is not necessary to view the entire piece to understand the conceptual element, there may be aesthetic differences between one moment and another.
In *preserve 'beauty'*, a triptych made up of 2000 Gerbera blossoms placed under glass, the final petal might have dropped at night when the work was unobserved. However, there is no privileged view or time, no climactic moment. The flowers, ice block or salt pillars used by Anya Gallaccio, would have had a moment when the flowers were at their peak of freshness, the salt pillars and ice blocks were intact, but, one rarely sees them in this state. The moment of *reflection* is no more or less important to the meaning of the work than any other moment in the work. These works may have an aesthetic element and use materials normally associated beautiful but they are not primarily concerned with beauty and the sublime moment. On the contrary they are concerned with its loss. This de-emphasis on the moment of climax removes one of the elements normally associated with western forms of narrative. These works are episodic, allowing the viewer to move in and out of the work at various stages of the ever
present. While we do not witness the moment of perfection or demise, these can be imagined and exist in the mind of the viewer.  

These works exist in two different time frameworks. Sam Taylor wood’s piece is in set time while Zoe Leonard’s is in event time. Set time is a process in a given time. We know where we are with set time and considering what we already know about our need for durational assessment and markers we can feel comfortable with it. Event time on the other hand is undetermined, going on until the task - a journey for example is completed. You continue with the process until you have completed your task or arrived at your destination regardless of the length of time it takes. There are no seats where we can sit and watch Strange Fruit (for David), because the work is the index of an event rather than the event itself. As we leave the gallery we take with us the thought of mortality and loss.

Both Paul Fraisse and Adam Phillips discuss boredom in terms of waiting and these works could be read in those terms, both waiting for their inevitable demise. However, waiting suggests a passivity that does not sit comfortably with boredom. Boredom and mourning are experienced as an assault, an assault on our sense of meaning. The possibility raised by some Ephemeral works is that the ending will never arrive. Waiting can be filled with expectation and promise, however waiting can also become endless as in Waiting for Godot. Here again the link between Beckett’s work and Ephemeral Art is useful. There is an assumption that when one sees a work of art, or reads a book that it is complete, that the artist has finished the work and we, the viewer are being offered a finite entity. There are the exceptions of ‘unfinished symphonies’ and incomplete manuscripts but these usually were intended to be complete and their unfinished state reflects an interruption in the lives of the artist. In Ephemeral Art there is often either no ending or an indeterminate ending. The difficulty posed by an indeterminate ending is particularly well illustrated by Liz Magor’s Time and Mrs Tiber where the artist’s envisioned ending was confounded by the unexpected rapid decay of the work and also her changing desires in relation to the work’s continued existence. The opening statement in Endgame - “it’s finished” - suggests that ‘it’ is over before it has begun. This is then followed by a qualification, “it’s nearly finished”. Bersani suggests that this doubt about the ending, an ending, which is also the

22 These works can be viewed as tragedies because of our association between melancholia and transience. I will look at this in greater detail when I look at Sigmund Freud essay ‘On Transience’.  
beginning, creates anxiety and represents time from the perspective of death. Strange Fruit (for David) also begins with an ending. David is dead as are the fruit that Leonard repairs. "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on." The lack of a beginning or ending also exists in the endless repeatability of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ Candy Spill series. These piles of sweets can be replenished and deprive the viewer of the satisfaction of a conclusion. The lack of distinction between beginnings and endings, and the recognition that endings are immanent in beginnings is the inherent truth of Ephemeral Art. Bersani states

Endgame is affected at every moment by a truth of life and literature of which life and literature outside Endgame generally appear to be ignorant. It is in this sense that art, as Proust claimed, is more real than life.

Philip Auslander in Liveness discusses the devaluation of the live presence in a mediatized culture. He refers to the work of Robert Blossom, who, in his mid 1960s experiments, Filmstage, combined filmed elements with live actors. Blossom saw the live and the filmed elements as competing with each other and he viewed this as an unfair competition. The filmed images were inevitably more compelling. He referred to the actors as merely “fifty-watt light bulbs.” The real is dull and banal by comparison with the mediatized. In Still Life there is a technical skill and a quality of light that we can appreciate; however in Strange Fruit (for David) this has been stripped away; this is naked artless rotting – anything which could allow a distraction from the real is denied us. The title, a reference to a song sung by Billie Holiday, also requires us to face unpalatable truths about racist lynching in the American south. The fruit in Strange Fruit are rotting and there is nothing that anyone can do about it. The artist has tried to repair them, conservators have attempted to conserve them, and all attempts have been futile.

Elizabeth Grosz discusses the relationship between time and the gift. She states; The Gift, as Derrida says, gives time. It does not give itself, an object, the given, to be possessed or consumed. It gives temporality, delay, and a calculation of timelessness. This is the very time needed for the time of judgement. The gift gives a possible future, a

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24 Beckett, S. Endgame, New York: Grove, 1958, p. 69 Quoted in Arts of Impoverishment p. 39
25 Bersani Arts of Impoverishment p.40
temporality in excess of the present and never contained within its horizon, the temporality of endless iteration.\textsuperscript{27}

The gift of time in Ephemeral Art requires viewers to work through boredom; it requires engagement, "the time of judgement", that demands and offers delay. In much the same way as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes knowledge as performative i.e. "knowledge does rather than simply is", I would suggest that boredom is also performative.\textsuperscript{28} Boredom does rather than is. Ephemeral Art offers boredom as a challenge: it challenges us to feel, to experience, to understand and to bear witness. It challenges our attachment to permanent art, notions of immortality, and it challenge the function of the museum as a morgue for art which can in itself be quite boring. While these works incorporate a process, the boringness of the process and the fact that it is not necessary to view the entirety of the process suggest that we must look for something else in these works. Rather than a traditional narrative, with a beginning or ending, or aesthetic moment of perfection, these works slow time to the pace of the organic, the temporal existence of our bodies, undramatically and imperceptibly moving toward disappearance. If the age of responsibility is defined at least in part by the awareness of death, and Ephemeral Art raises that awareness, then this work requires viewers to draw upon, or confront their lack of, inner resources. One of the things the works under discussion have in common is the risk they have taken of alienating audiences and art museums by creating ephemeral works which are boring by many traditional criteria of Western Art. They take this risk because of the link between boredom, awareness of mortality and mourning.

\textsuperscript{27} Grosz, E. "The Time of Violence. Deconstruction and Value" \textit{Cultural Values} Vol. 2, No. 2 1998

Communicative act

Wabi sabi is an intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life in the spiritual world. It is an understated beauty that exists in the modest, rustic, imperfect, or even decayed, an aesthetic sensibility that finds a melancholic beauty in the impermanence of all things.¹

Periodically artists or groups of artists take a path which leads them away from making objects which are designed to survive indefinitely, but instead have made works that are short-lived and have a performative dimension. This chapter explores the emergence of one such group of artists committed to making ephemeral art in the 1950s and 1960s. This will give me the opportunity to explore a type of transient art which has strong affinities with, but also crucial differences from, the ephemeral art which is the focus of this thesis, and thus assist in clarifying the distinctive qualities of the latter. These artists discussed here were specifically interested in transience and expressed it in works that were themselves transient. The use of the term ‘communicative act’, which has already been touched upon in the introduction, suggests that in ephemeral art what is communicated is not merely dependent on the visual appearance of the art object but what is expressed by its disappearance or decay. In this chapter, I will explore one example of the shift from art object to communicative act through the influence of John Cage on the development of ‘Happenings’. Joseph Kosuth in his article ‘Art after Philosophy’ states

¹ Juniper, A. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence. Boston, Mass. Tuttle, 2003. Writers on the subject of wabi sabi are unanimous in the assertion that it is a difficult concept to translate, however most definitions refer to simplicity and transience. John G. Ruby, writing in Romanticism and Zen Buddhism, defines wabi as ‘radical humility’ and sabi as ‘an existential demonstration of the voidist freedom’. p.115.
The 'value' of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they added to the conception of art or what wasn’t there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art’s nature. And to do this one cannot concern oneself with the handed-down ‘language’ of traditional art, as this activity is based on the assumption that there is only one way of framing art propositions.

Cage presented his audience with just such a set of propositions framed according to the rules of change and chance. His contribution to ‘the conception of art’ is not merely in the works he created but also his influence as an educator of and inspiration to others. Kosuth continues ‘[a]rt lives through influencing other art’. Cage was a significant influence on the younger artists around him and a link to the past, through his friendship with Marcel Duchamp. Cage was also a link to Eastern philosophy, which unlike Western philosophy, encompasses flux, chance and decay as part of existence, as the definition of wabi sabi quoted at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates.

The longing for permanence pervades western culture, in every aspect of life from monotheistic religion’s assumption that immortality of the individual soul as the ultimate good (unlike eastern religion’s desire for escape from the cycle of reincarnation) and the ideal of the perfect work of art which transcends time, in contrast to the aesthetic of wabi sabi. Part of this ‘structure of feeling’ assumes that the desire for permanence is a universal response to human mortality; however the history of the ephemeral art under discussion shows, amongst other things, that this is a culturally derived predisposition. This is important in the discussion of ephemeral art for several reasons, not least in how the work is perceived and understood, and in how art institutions react to the deterioration of the work. I will argue that the engagement with transience can be seem as an expression of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with that culture.
through an abandonment of its values of permanence, stability and order as expressed through art. Ephemeral art as protest against the values of the art world can be seen in this light, but there are also life experiences which so challenge the belief in permanence that other ways of being in the world are required. At these times the cultural requirement may be an engagement with transience. The works discussed in this thesis represent a confluence of both ephemerality as disenchantment with the art world and ephemerality as a need for an alternative way of being in and understanding the world.

Owen Smith in his history of Fluxus traces the genesis of the dematerialisation of the art object which he links to a critique of art institutions, and relates this to a growing ‘interest in a life/art continuity’

The network of ideas/concerns/issues that links the attacks of the avant-garde with the revolts of the post-World War II anti-modernists is a general critique of the institutions of art in the twentieth century. This took the form of a desire to establish a life/art continuity in opposition to the notion of artists as romantic geniuses or alchemists with a socially prescribed role as non-utilitarian perceivers of the world. The result of this position was a shift towards a dematerialization of art, from the object to an emphasis on processes, actions, performance, behavior, and life. Within this shift a key idea was the recognition of indeterminacy as a characteristic of life (i.e. nature), which also carried over into an interest in a life/art continuity.6

I would suggest that dematerialisation can also be seen as a response to a broader dissatisfaction, not just with art institutions but with the dominant culture generally. The shift in the artworld towards the incorporation of transient elements, like the interest in Buddhism in the 1960s, represents a desire to find alternative forms of meaning. Rather than view the engagement with ephemerality and Buddhism as contingent, I suggest that they are consequences of the same dissatisfaction. If one focused on the dematerialisation of the art object purely from the perspective of the artists working in the U.S. in the 1960s it could appear to suggest that the route to ephemerality was through the influence of Buddhism through John Cage. While Cage is undoubtedly a significance influence on visual artists, these artists did not adopt Buddhism to the same extend that Cage did. Marcia Tucker in her article ‘White Paper II No Title’ points out the paucity of references to Buddhist practice in discussions of art of the sixties.7 I suggest that Buddhism, rather than being the key to ephemerality, may have validated a growing interest in a


shift from art object to communicative act and provided a focus for artists attempting to find a
new means of expression rather than an engagement with an alternative spirituality.

Smith creates a link between significant historical events or time-periods and ‘attacks’ on and ‘revolts’ against art institutions. While I might choose less violent terms I will explore the relationship between new forms of art and dissatisfaction or a sense of loss engendered by global conflict. Smith also argues that ephemeral art emerges as part of a reassessment of the role of artists from an aloof position as observer of world events to that of engaged commentator. The form of expression which this engagement produces is what is germane to my thesis.

Paul Schimmel, organiser of the ambitious exhibition Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979, a comprehensive overview of the evolution from art-object to objectlessness, referred to the significance of larger historical events on artists’ chosen means of expression. He describes World War II as the catalyst that led the generation of artists who came to maturity in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s to question the very fundamentals of the art object. These artists grew up in the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty generated by the Cold War and the self-loathing that existed as a result of the overwhelming evidence of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ which emerged with the revelations about the Holocaust at the end of World War II. While the war in Europe was over, America was once again involved in military conflicts, in Korea from 1950 to 1953 and in Vietnam from 1957 to 1975, where the victors of WWII were accused of atrocities and had to make an ignominious departure. Kristine Stiles, also writing in the exhibition catalogue, makes the link between the political realm and art actions of the period.

I think that the proportional significance of the cultural to the political became vivid in the art actions generally associated with ‘The Sixties’ primarily because of the hyper-awareness in that period that human action in the social realm impacts the political domain. For me, the sixties began in 1955 with Rosa Parks, . . . and end some time between 1973 and 1975, when the U.S. withdrew troops from Vietnam, and the ignoble helicopter flights from the roof-top of the American embassy there forever etched on my mind. Through the typographical device of capitalisation and bracketing she identifies ‘The Sixties’ as more then a decade sandwiched between the 1950s and 1970s but a social, political and cultural phenomenon that spread beyond the chronological time-period.

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\[ Stiles, Kristine. in Out of Actions ibid p. 228 \]
In an interview held at the Dallas Public Library Cable Access Studio in 1988 John Held, Jr. asked Allan Kaprow if he could explain why the ideas of Dada died out in the 1920s and '30s and resurfaced in the 1960s in the work of Fluxus, Gutai, Yves Klein and the Nouveau Realists in France. Kaprow initially responded, 'It just happened... There's no explanation for it.'

However with some prompting from Held, Kaprow said -

The usual kind of exhaustion principle, that the prior avant-garde had exhausted itself is true, but it's not an adequate explanation, because you don't find it happening with every exhaustion... It's just beyond us. One could draw parallels today with the powerful conservative backlash that occurred right after the exhaustion of Abstract Expressionists around the world. Particularly those in New York in the Eisenhower years. You know, the rampages of Joe McCarthy and the Cold War in Europe. There were a lot of features which resemble those of today.¹⁰

While this theory of action and response may explain change, it doesn't explain the particular form change takes. Stiles, Schimmel, and Kaprow cite a diverse range of events as the catalyst for this engagement, suggesting that not one specific event results in abandonment and rejection of the traditional forms of creativity but that it is caused by something that all of these events have in common. It seems reasonable to assume that a rejection of a specific aspect of one's culture stimulated by broader events within a society can be seen not just as a rejection of that one specific aspect, but a symbol of a broader rejection of other important tenets of that culture. Thus a rejection of the European aesthetic rooted in the requirement for the permanence, durability, and perfection in art, is not merely an internal artworld aesthetic revolt but a response to the broader culture represented by that form of artistic expression. The artist Robert Gober writing of a later set of events, in Parkett in 1989 also reflects on the possible causes of shifts within the art world. He states:

A friend called me at the studio the other day and I used the opportunity to complain on and on about the difficulty of writing this or of writing anything lucid or useful about AIDS. He told me how much the phenomenon had transformed his own life, but he wasn't certain if the disease had transfigured the times or if the response to the epidemic wasn't in fact a symptom of a larger public malaise, a broader political shifting of cares and cures.¹¹

¹¹ Gober, R. 'Cumulus from America', Parkett no. 19, March 1989, p. 171. I will return to the impact of the AIDS pandemic on the artworld in the discussion of the work of Zoe Leonard and Felix Gonzalez-Torres in Chapter 6; here it is worth highlighting the connection between these eras when artists engaged in the production of 'alternative' form of art making.
Schimmel identifies four principal players in the shift from object to actions: Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) born in Cody, Wyoming; Lucio Fontana (1899-1968), born in Rosario di Santa Fe, Argentina; John Cage (1912-1992) born in Los Angeles, California; and Shozo Shimamoto (1928) born Osaka, Japan. This is disputed territory. Michael Kirby's writing would appear to confirm this list, placing the Gutai group founded by Shimamoto and John Cage at the forefront of this development. Allan Kaprow questions the primacy of Gutai as well as the role of Pollock. Other writers query the absence of Yoko Ono, and I would be tempted to include the German born Gustav Metzger (1926) working in the UK and Lygia Clark (1920 - 1988) in Brazil.

Regardless of who is acknowledged as the instigator, from the evidence of the texts and works of this period it is clear that there is a relationship between Zen philosophy and the changing concepts of the work of art.

A key feature in the sequence of influences is that of John Cage on the development of Allan Kaprow's Happenings. Cage had studied with Buddhist scholar Daisetz Suzuki when Suzuki was lecturing at Columbia University, New York, between 1949 and 1951. Cage became a conduit through which an appreciation of the transient was translated in to 1960s America. At the same time Japanese artists working in New York, such as Yoko Ono and Gutai contributed to this translation. Yoko Ono's work, while influenced by Buddhism and Cage, took a slightly different route in that she considered Cage to be 'overly intellectual' and rejected his anti-emotional approach.

Rather than catalogue all the possible areas in which Cage may have influenced artists in the 1960s I want to focus on specific elements that he contributed to the development of a new art form, which incorporated transience. Cage incorporated chance elements into his music both through the use of ambient sounds and his aleatoric composition. Music of Changes (1951) was composed using I Ching chance operations - the various elements of the composition such as tempo, dynamics, rests and duration of sound were determined by tossing a coin at a chart and recorded these in conventional musical notation. At this stage the composition was then

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12 I include the dates and places of birth here to show that the de emphasis on the art object and the shift to action and process was not located in a single movement or school but was happening in different location at the same time. It would be a mistake to overplay the links between these artists viewed from the distance of forty years. As I will discuss many commentators link Kaprow's work with that of the Gutai group, a suggestion which he has rejected on several occasions.

13 Marranca PAJ no 56,1996, pp 115 - 120, here p 117

14 Metzger first Auto Destructive Art performance took place on 3rd July 1961 at Bankside, London at the same time Lygia Clark started work on Bichos which were the beginning of her 'propositions' and performative work.

15 A more complete survey of the influence of eastern philosophy on Western art is provided by Jacquelyn Baas in her book Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today, Berkeley, C.A: University of California Press, 2005

16 Ibid p 162
performed by the musicians. *Water Music* (1952) incorporated the sound of water being poured back and forth from one pot to another, as well as a radio and a deck of card being shuffled.

Cage's next development was to allow the musician to determine the outcome of the work, changing the role of the performer from that of interpreter of someone else's work to that of co-creator. Many of Cage's experiments of this period took place at Black Mountain College in North Carolina which was devoted to interdisciplinary learning founded on the principles that a liberal and fine art education should extend beyond the classroom. In 1952, Cage's *Theatre Piece No.1*, widely acknowledged as the precursor of Happenings was performed there. This multidisciplinary event incorporating Cage's music was performed by David Tudor, with dance by Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings, poetry readings by M. C. Richards and Charles Olson and a lecture by Cage. Unscripted and unrehearsed the performers mingled with members of the audience.

Cage not only influenced other artists but he acknowledged the impact their work had on him. Discussing the influence of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) Cage said that it inspired what still is his best known and still controversial work *4'33''* (1952). This was, he said, 'a way of making emptiness visible' 17 The score for this work indicates the duration in minutes and seconds of the three movements but no specifies no intentional sounds. The site sensitive element of this work is interesting in that it depends on the ambience of the concert hall and the usual behaviour of a concert audience. The opening and closing of the piano lid frame periods of time in which the audience are prepared to focus their attention on listening. This piece not only highlights the ambient sounds of the concert hall but also the quality of attention required to experience the work. The audience become the creators of the work in a situation facilitated by Cage. Writing of the relationship between Cage, Duchamp, and Fluxus, Owen Smith states:

The relationship between Fluxus and John Cage, who met Duchamp in the late 1940s and was profoundly impressed by his work, was more direct than between Duchamp and Fluxus. Ben Vautier stressed the central role of Cage's idea for the development of Fluxus, stating that Fluxus would not exist 'especially without Cage who, . .has done two brainwashings. The first, at the level of contemporary music by the notion of indeterminateness, the other, by his teaching through the spirit of Zen and his will to depersonalize art.'

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17 Quoted in *Smile of the Buddha*, op.cit. p 171
Cage held classes at New School for Social Research from 1958-1959. Hannah Higgins in her book *Fluxus Experience*, described these classes as ‘central to Fluxus work.’\(^{18}\) They were attended by the Fluxus artists George Brecht, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Scott Hyde, Allan Kaprow, and Florence Tarlow. They were non-hierarchal with an atmosphere of discussion, free exchange of ideas and experimentation reflecting the philosophy of Black Mountain College. Out of this class came George Brecht’s ‘Event Score’ and Allan Kaprow’s ‘Happenings’.\(^{19}\)

There are several keys aspects of Kaprow’s work that have a direct link to Cage’s developments in music and to his Buddhist philosophy and that distinguish it from the formalist tradition of art production that was predominant in America in the 1950s. These aspects – process as artwork, the fragility of materials, the directive intention of the artist, involvement of spectator, the relationship between material and meaning, the acceptance of chance, the quality of attention, and the abandonment of permanence - are significant in the discussion and appreciation of an aesthetic of the transient.

The fact that Kaprow was so greatly influenced by John Cage and the world of music and dance is significant in relation to the form his work eventually took. Like the Dadaists before him, Kaprow drew on influences from a wide variety of art forms that included poetry, theatre, as well as the visual arts to create his Happenings. This was a great change in his practice – for reasons he does not make clear Kaprow states that before 1952 he had wanted to keep the art forms as separate as possible. Michael Kirby in his book *Happenings* suggests that the Gutai group may also have had an influence on the development of Happenings. The Japanese avant-garde group Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai (Gutai Art Association) was formed in 1954 in Osaka by Yoshihara Jiro, Kanayma Akira, Murakami Saburo, Shiraga Kazuo, and Shimamoto Shozo.\(^{20}\)

the arts we have known up to now appear to us in general to be fakes fitted out with a tremendous affectation. Let us take leave of these piles of counterfeit objects on the altars, ...

Kaprow himself is at pains to point out that the chronology of his acquaintance with the Gutai

\(^{18}\) Higgins, H. *Fluxus Experience*, London: University of California Press, 2002 p2. I concentrate on Fluxus in the U.S.; however simultaneously Fluxus in Europe also had its beginnings in music and poetry and was centred around Karlheinz Stockhausen and his wife the painter Mary Bauermeister. Stockhausen’s composition course in Darmstadt was attended by Monte Young and Nam June Paik with whom Stockhausen worked in the electronic music studio of West German Radio in Cologne.

\(^{19}\) The first *Happening* took place at the Reuben Gallery in 1959; this following on from the ‘concerted action’ which took place at the Black Mountain College.

\(^{20}\) Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai - Gutai translated into English as ‘embodiment’ or ‘concrete’ Art Association.

group would put his knowledge of its work at 1963 - significantly later than the development of the Happenings.\(^{22}\)

In his introduction to Kaprow’s *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelley argues that while others may have been mentors it was philosopher John Dewey who was Kaprow’s intellectual father. He uses the marginalia Kaprow jotted in *Art as Experience* to show how the seeds of Kaprow’s development were sown as early as 1949. Kelley interestingly links Dewey’s pragmatism and Zen philosophy. He states;

Like Dewey’s pragmatism, Zen mistrusts dogma and encourages education, seeks enlightenment but avoids formalist logic, accepts the body as well as the mind, and embraces discipline but relinquishes ego-centered control.\(^{23}\)

Dewey’s emphasis on experience and his critique of institutions are threads that pervade Kaprow’s work which can be seen as a response to the question he asks in the margins of *Art as Experience* ‘What is an Authentic experience?’\(^{24}\)

The definition of Happenings has become somewhat confused mainly because these events have acquired a mythology, which often portray them as spontaneous or even chaotic. Kaprow has since stated that he has repudiated the word ‘because other people before that were using it.’\(^{22}\) He later referred to his work as ‘activities’ to distinguish them from the other works that had adopted the term Happening. However, the original Happenings were scripted multimedia events. *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*, presented at the Reuben Gallery, New York in 1959 is generally considered to have provided the term ‘Happenings’. The loft gallery was divided into three sections with six Happenings taking place in each. The invited audience, seventy five in all, was given a programme on arrival telling them where to sit for each part. Because of the structure of the space, the audience would only see a combination of some of the Happenings, although there were mirrors through which it was possible to glimpse the simultaneous Happenings. Lucas Samaras, a student of Kaprow and a participant in *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* describes the instructions he was given for the event – ‘Here’s a violin: make a couple of sounds. There’s a table: play chess with Bob Whitman. Do it as flatly as possible. Whatever you do, don’t be cute: perform the act plainly.’\(^{26}\)

Kaprow’s writing and particularly his book *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* provided a source book for artists wishing to engage in experimental art. Taking each element of

\[^{24}\] ibid. p xxv
\[^{25}\] from an interview with John Held, op. cit.
\[^{26}\] Samaras, L. ‘Matter of Facts’ *Artforum* summer 2006 p
an artwork separately, e.g. materials, colour, field, he outlines the possibilities available to the artist. Throughout there is an emphasis on the process as a means of developing form and that the form should be dictated by the materials, working from the inside out, rather than beginning with a preconceived notion of form. With respect to the found objects that may be included Kaprow provided the following list of examples:

These things may include clothing, baby carriages, machine parts, masks, photographs, printed words, and so forth, which have a high degree of associational meaning; however, they may just as often be more generalized, like plastic film, cloth, raffia, mirrors, electric lights, cardboard, or wood – somewhat less specific in meaning, restricted to the substances themselves, their use, and modes of transformation. There is no apparent theoretical limit to what may be used. 27

However, Kaprow also includes a note of caution and suggested that works that include some objects have a limited iconography. The risk in using such materials is that the effect ‘is one of charm rather than shock or transport: spiritually they are bloodless and cute . . . ’ However, despite this possible pitfall Kaprow says it is still possible to use diverse material as long as the artist is alert to the clichés. In the use of found objects the same rules apply with regard to colour as in traditional artwork –

Within this context, color itself enjoys the full range that it has always had in painting. It may define a surface (as a coat of paint on a chair), evoke a film-like atmosphere or glaze, or saturate a whole substance with its properties. Needless to say, all the sensations of heat, fragrance, taste, weight, and motion, and all the most subtle symbolical overtones of color, with which we are already familiar, are not only amplified but wrapped in these new circumstances. 28

The use of non-traditional materials has three main consequences for the artwork - first they represent an enlargement of the domain of art’s subject matter - the predominant characteristic that separates assemblages and environments from traditional sculpture is the relationship between material and meaning. 29 Rather than the material being neutral as in the case of paint, the material itself can carry meaning within the work. Secondly, the use of non-traditional materials creates the possibility of a new range of forms not possible with conventional means. And thirdly, they materials themselves are often physically fragile, ‘if their obsolescence is not deliberately planned, it is expected.’ 30 Kaprow identified this as the greatest

28 Ibid
29 Ibid p 166
30 Ibid p 167
point of contention with regard to this new work and it is also one of the significant differences to artworks of the past. It is Kaprow's choice of fragile, organic and ephemeral materials and the inclusion of elements of change and chance that most closely echoes the four tenets of wabi sabi - the stress on the transient and the use of the commonplace as opposed to the 'artful'.

Kaprow identifies Impressionism as the starting point for a debate regarding the 'enduring versus the passing'. He defines the western position as 'deep belief in the stable, clear, and permanent. These qualities were thought to be the high achievements of a striving, rational mind which has overcome brute and chaotic forces of nature.' Since then artists have increasingly made work that could be described as faulty. Kaprow suggests that this is not entirely accidental, and artist were concerned about this aspect of their work, but, it was a consequence of attempting to capture 'subtle and spontaneous feelings and responses that were the living expression of change.'

Change, governing both reality and art, has extended, therefore, from the expression of an idea arrested in a painting, to a work in which the usually slow mutations wrought by nature are quickened and literally made part of the experience of it: they manifest the very processes of creation-decay-creation almost as one watches.

Kaprow's great leap forward then was not an interest in the fleeting, the constantly changing world of flux which had already been captured in static works by earlier artists but to include this very flux in his work, to work in collaboration with change and chance. The inclusion of chance also meant an abandonment of the ideal of perfection associated with western art and an appreciation of the imperfect and the accidental associated with wabi sabi. Much of this ground had already been addressed by Dada. Jean Arp made a work according to the laws of chance in 1916-1917. Marcel Duchamp dropped three threads to produce a chance work in 1913-1914, Three Standard Needle Weavings, and Man Ray, Picabia, and Tristan Tzara all produced works by chance in one form or another. However, Kaprow brought all these elements together and developed a clear and coherent philosophy that could be used by other artists wishing to engage with the ephemeral.

Kaprow viewed the relationship between his work and its public as one of dialogue in which the work is completed by the viewer in their interpretation. The work of art 'must now receive its meaning and qualities from the unique, expectant (and often anxious) focus of the observer, listener, or intellectual participant. . .The artist and his artist-public are expected to

31 Ibid p 167  
32 Ibid p 67-68  
33 Ibid p 168  
34 Ibid p 169
carry on a dialogue on a mutual plane." In some of Kaprow's Happenings, there were no spectators, all those present were participants. As with work Lygia Clark carried out between 1968 and 1975 while she lived in Paris, these ambitious projects were possible because both Kaprow and Clark were working in Universities sympathetic towards their research. Clark's *Baba Antropofagica* (1973) was made possible because of the cooperation of a group of students at the Sorbonne and Kaprow had a similar group of willing participants at Cornell. In fact, his work *Household* (1964) was commissioned by Cornell.  

Four of the works discussed in this thesis require the physical involvement of the spectator to complete the work - *Untitled (Portrait of Dad)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and *Litsus* by Dadang Christanto, *1001 Nights* by Barbara Campbell and my own work *In Memory*. While the other works, Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit (For David)* and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *Reading for Three Female Corpses*, and *Time and Mrs. Tiber* by Liz Magor do not require a physical engagement, they do require an emotional engagement. These works require a quality of attention which involves looking beyond the physical object to grasp the unspeakable truth which they embody. This quality of attention is closely linked to the aspect of boredom which Adam Phillips described as 'integral to the process of taking one's time.' Marcia Tucker also refers to this quality of attention required to experience some works of art. She discusses the public's reaction to exhibitions of works by two artists, Richard Tuttle and Markus Raetz. Both of these artists produced subtle and elusive works that required an effort on the part of the viewer to 'see'. The challenge posed this work was such that, in a world where art is expected to be controversial, the exhibition of Tuttle's work resulted in such a furore that Tucker was dismissed from her post at the Whitney Museum. Commenting on Raetz's work Tucker states:  

'It is the process of viewing that actualizes the work [...] it's not just a matter of paying attention, but of what kind of attention you pay. 

In this heightened/focused process of participative viewing, we can see the shift from art work to communicative act. The communicative act offers a form of encounter, which is not entirely dependent on art objects, but through a quality of attention, the work can communicate with the viewer/participant. This is also the quality of attention brought sharply into focus by Cage's *4'33"*. The viewer/participant is no longer passively sitting waiting to receive information but must actively engage with the work. They must in fact do the work that the art requires. The primary function of *wabi sabi* art is the transference of spiritual knowledge.

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35 Ibid p 173  
36 There are obvious financial implications for artists producing ephemeral work – they must fund the production of the work from some source other than the sale of work. This will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 3 in relation to the risk artist take in making work that will disappear.
According to this philosophy anything and everything can become art, there is no boundary between art and life. By giving one’s complete attention to a task, one can lose oneself in an activity regardless of what it is and through this concentration, the task becomes art. By bringing the mind to bear on the here and now, everyday activities can take on profound meaning and in Zen these are considered key for the development of the mind. This attitude can transform the most mundane task into art. 37

Kaprow also insisted that the art/life divide should be ‘kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct as possible’ again reflecting the notion in Zen Philosophy that in fact everything we do has the potential to be art. The blurring of boundaries between art and life is closely related to the role of the spectator. When art ceases to be something separate from us, aloof in a clinical gallery, but asks us to participate physically and address those painful aspects of our existence then this divide loses meaning. The work becomes part of us and we in turn become part of the work.

Nowhere is the contrast between eastern and western thought brought more sharply into focus than in relation to the notion of preservation. The specific subject of museum conservation in relation to ephemeral art will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 3. For the moment I would like to summarize both positions – in western practice we strive to maintain object in a state of perfection and to that end preserve and conserve the object which prohibits any ‘use’ other than the use the can be gained from viewing. Marks of ‘wear and tear’ are considered regrettable damage. In eastern philosophy, the marks of use enhance an object and therefore change is not viewed as deterioration but development. Associated with wabi sabi is the concept of Kami – a Shinto belief that objects possess a special spirit or god. 38 When objects are passed down from one generation to another they also come to contain the spirit of the ancestors. The result of this is the appreciation of the use of an object and the patina objects achieve through use. Kaprow embraced this philosophy and suggested that it was not necessarily that the perfect object should be passed down to future generation but rather the values that the object embodied.

There is no fundamental reason why it should be a fixed, enduring object to be placed in a locked case. The spirit does not require the proofs of the embalmer: [...] If one cannot pass this work on to his children in the form of a piece of ‘property,’ the attitudes and values it embodies surely can be transmitted.

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37 Juniper op cit p 91
38 Juniper op cit p 86
This echoes, in both sentiment and language, Yoshihara’s 1956 statement quoted earlier. Both use language that either explicitly or subtly suggests a connection between traditional art objects and the emphasis on conservation as a form of death.

Just as Juniper refers to the impossible situation he faces when writing about a subject that should be indefinable, Kaprow acknowledges the irony of transmitting his ideas in a form that lends itself to dogmatism. He concludes by stating these are not ‘ironclad rules but fruitful limits within which to work’ and that these will be broken once they are found to be no longer of use [a pragmatic approach again evoking Dewey’s philosophy]. The ironic contradictions which arise out of Kuprow’s giving anti-dogmatic advice are similar to those relating to ephemeral art when the question of legacy arises: attempts to preserve the work for future generations may destroy the very quality which gave the work meaning. Chapter 3 will address these issues in detail.

Despite these obvious connections between art of ‘The Sixties’ and Zen philosophy there is little mention of this in contemporary writing about art of the period. In the Out of Action catalogue essay by Paul Schimmel mentions Zen only once in passing and while there is significant discussion of Cage’s influence on artists there is no mention that this influence is informed by his interest in Zen philosophy. As part of the Awake o Forum, Marcia Tucker also refers to the lack of reference to Buddhist practice. This may be because this was accepted as ‘common knowledge’ and did not need to be stated, or it may reflect an aversion to the idea of there being a religious or spiritual dimension of art. Clearly, it is also possible that artists can adopt the aesthetic qualities of a religion or philosophy without adopting the belief system. This is not a new phenomenon – many 20th century composers, from Stravinsky to Bernstein, have written works using the forms of the Christian liturgy which do not reflect their personal beliefs. Christian images have so permeated western visual culture and language that references to it have become secularized; artists using this iconography may simply be adopting a cultural shorthand rather than expressing their religious philosophy. Artists of this period who adopted transience as a means of expression were not all engaging with Zen philosophy. So while Cage may have been motivated to produce a particular type of work by his interest and belief in Zen philosophy the participants in his classes may have been drawn to the aesthetic qualities and the possibilities for innovation and expression his work offered rather the philosophy per se. As Schimmel and Stiles both point out, artists of ‘The Sixties’ were disenchanted with the

39 see reference 21
40 Kaprow op cit p 207
prevailing cultural values, and the aesthetic of Buddhism offered an alternative form of expression for this shift in values. Mark Epstein suggests that Buddhism offered both inspiration and confirmation to artists looking for alternative forms of expression freed from the constraints of materials. Epstein also points out that the meditative practices are familiar territory for many artists and the focused concentration and open-mindedness of mediation have parallels in the creative process.

However, while the theories that artists were disenchanted with their society or that Cage offered inspiration may help explain why artists rebelled against some conventions of the art world, they do not however explain why Cage himself was attracted to Zen ideas and why he and other artists chose, amongst the many possibilities, to express themselves through transient communicative acts rather than artworks in more enduring media on the subjects that preoccupied them. One possible explanation for the fact that most contemporary critics avoided discussing the role of Buddhism for these artists is that a far deeper cultural aversion to the existential implications of transient artworks is at play, preventing an engagement with these works other than a focus on the physical objects and the chronology of who did what first. Rather than viewing this as a simple cause and effect relationship it is possible that Zen philosophy offered a framework and a vocabulary that facilitated a growing interest in the communicative act stimulated by wider social developments.

The sense that comes across from post-World War II artists' engagement with transience is of their sense of disillusion not just with the establishment art world, but with a secular society locked in the Cold War, aware of the implications of the Holocaust and Vietnam. Their work not only echoes but draws a direct inspiration from the response of the Dadaists to the immense destruction of World War I. There was some overlap with modernisms' agenda of making everything new through experimentation and radical change. However the creation of work which was in itself transient was a form of lived rebellion against this prevailing orthodoxy, as it represented a sense of the loss of meaning and to some extent of art itself.

This chapter has reviewed one group of ephemeral artists and identified a number of qualities which their work shares with the work I focus on in this thesis – a concern with transience, a requirement from the viewer for a particular quality of attention. It has also attempted to reflect some of the complex interplay of forces at work in the generation of ephemeral art – the inspiration of influential innovators, of non-Western aesthetics, of

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philosophical ideas and new artistic intentions derived from them, of historical events in the wider world and of moods and trends in the wider culture. The ephemeral art I will discuss is similarly embedded in history and culture, though of a different period, and engaged with physically transient art objects as a prime aesthetic value. However it also differs in important respects, notably its engagement with powerful feelings of loss which are, depending on one’s perspective, sublimated, intellectualised or denied, in the art discussed in this chapter. Before proceeding to the works themselves, the next chapter will address the issue which emerged above. This is the contradictions and ironies which emerge when museums attempt to acquire and preserve ephemeral art objects, which are very revealing of the depth of the challenge posed to many of our deepest assumptions about the nature of art by work which is conveys its meaning through physical ephemerality.
Immortality is valued differently in different cultures – in the West, it is seen as the ultimate good. In Eastern philosophies, reincarnation is seen as an evil to be escaped. At a less spiritual level, most people in most cultures see their offspring as offering an especially valuable kind of continuity, one which helps give life meaning. In the post-religious culture of the West this is interpreted as a kind of genetic immortality\(^1\). The other form of immortality available in capitalist, consumerist, secular culture is achieved through the accumulation of objects. On a personal level, for most people this functions through the objects we bequeath to our descendants. For creative people in any field it is through the legacy of their productions – the works of art they make, the organizations they found. On a grander scale, individuals who endow large institutions have their name attached in perpetuity, as for example the Tate galleries, the Sainsbury Wing and the J Paul Getty Museum. This view of the donors’ motivation does not deny that there is a large element of generosity and philanthropy behind such large endowments of art institutions. The fact that they are rarely done anonymously suggests however that generosity is accompanied by a desire to keep an individual or family name ‘alive’. Equally, as a culture, we accumulate objects in national collections as a form of propaganda not just directed at the present but at the future, to illustrate the artistic achievements of our era. As long as

\(^1\) This is explored in the Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989
archaeology has been a subject of study, groups of people and stages in human cultural development have been defined by the objects they have left behind and the materials used to make these objects. Thus there have been Stone, Bronze and Iron Age people, as well as Beaker folk. This is not just a convenient means of classification, it suggests a powerful relationship between people and the objects they produce and value – you are what you make.

This is a thought echoed by cognitive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who states

"[t]he evolution of humankind [. . .] tends to be measured not by gains in intellect, morality, and wisdom: the benchmarks of progress have to do with our ability to fashion things of ever greater complexity in increasing numbers. . . . the transaction between people and the things they create constitute a central aspect of the human condition. Past memories, present experiences, and future dreams of each person are inextricably linked to the objects that comprise his or her environment."

Csikszentmihalyi cites the starting point for his enquiry into the meaning of things as a book by George Perec written in 1965, *Les Choses (Things: A Story of the Sixties)*. In this book, the characters are defined by the objects they own and their relationship with these things. While this is a fictional account, there is little doubt about the role of objects in the formation of identity.

Stone, bronze, and iron represent significant steps in technological development. In recent times, there has been a shift from cultures defined by production to cultures defined by consumption – you are what you own. All of these cultural forces investing meaning in objects apply to artworks to an even greater extent than to other categories of object. Each object being unique means they have more rarity value than even the most exclusive consumer goods, while their prestige is further enhanced by the romantic view of the artist as hero.

In this context where objects have a wide range of symbolic meanings relating to individual and group identity, and provide a bulwark against awareness of mortality, it is hardly surprising that art objects which are designed to decay should affront our notion of order. The desire to conserve is not simply a technical issue, but reflects a deep-rooted psychological need to maintain the stability of our worldview.

The task of maintaining cultural property falls to art institutions and the conservators they employ. The treatment of contemporary art and Ephemeral Art in particular poses new and complicated dilemmas for art institutions. In the last decade of the 20th Century it became

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increasingly obvious that unless there were significant developments in methodology, technical expertise and philosophical understanding of conservation, much of the artistic output from that period would be lost. The concerns relating to the conservation of ephemeral art are not merely abstract, philosophical issues but have legal ramification particularly as art is an investment commodity. The production of ephemeral work can also have consequences for an artist's career, which can depend on the existence of a large body of exhibitable work. In this chapter I will not only discuss the physical vulnerability of ephemeral art and the consequences for institutions but also the legal and career issues raised by artistic engagement with transience.

In the definition of Ephemeral Art I have posited, a communicative act must possess an inherent vice to be truly ephemeral. In this section, I will examine the term inherent vice, its relationship to directive intent, and the role it plays in the meaning of Ephemeral Art. I will also discuss two other terms associated with inherent vice - 'latent defect' and 'wear and tear'. These terms will be discussed in relation to specific art works to distinguish Ephemeral Art from works that are either temporary or works that are victim to the deterioration that every object is subject to. A 'latent defect' is closely related to an inherent vice and refers to a defect which is not immediately obvious, or, was not apparent when the object was made. 'Wear and tear' obviously refers to the deterioration of an object through use. While inherent vice, latent defect, and wear and tear, can in some cases overlap, in the first half of this chapter I will use these three terms to distinguish between different forms of deterioration. In the second half I will focus on the implication of deterioration through an examination of the institutional response to ephemerality.

To arrive at a clearer classification of Ephemeral Art as distinct from other forms of deterioration I will examine six possible ways in which an artwork can deteriorate or appear to do so. All artworks could be said to have an inherent vice as all objects by their nature deteriorate over time. Even works made from materials considered to be durable, such as bronze and stone, will eventually decay. However, in such cases the deterioration will be imperceptible and over an extended period – a subjective sense of time relating to the duration of an individual human life. For example, figures made on the Cyclades between 2000 and 3200 B.C. still exist even if subject to a degree of 'wear and tear', and their age – more than 4,000 years – is, in relation to a human lifespan, a very long time. The works in this first category are those with which everyone is familiar and are exhibited in galleries all over the world. In some cases, the deterioration of the work has affected how we view it and has contributed to our aesthetic predisposition for ruins. There are numerous examples of classical works that have acquired the status of ruins and the romantic and tragic significance of these works is well documented. While there may be debate
regarding the conservation of these works, they were not produced with the intention that they should fade away and thus the decay is not significant to the meaning of these works in the way I have defined. It is highly unlikely that these works would be confused with Ephemeral Art.

Works in the second category may occasionally be confused with ephemeral works and it may sometimes be necessary to refer to the artist’s instructions to establish the nature of the works. These are works made from materials that are not normally considered durable, such as foodstuffs, but are not intended to decay. These works are frequently problematic for curators and conservators, and have in recent years generated a considerable amount of research with the increase of the use of non-traditional material in contemporary art. The Tate Liverpool held a survey exhibition of Sarah Lucas’ work from October 2005 to January 2006. Lucas frequently uses unconventional materials including vegetables and other foodstuffs. The various fruit and vegetables in Lucas’ work are replaced regularly. *Two Fried Eggs and Kebab* (1992) represents a reclining female nude, and incorporates two fried eggs and a kebab as the title suggests. Lucas stipulated that the two fried eggs should be replaced daily and these were cooked in the gallery café. Interestingly it is not necessary for the artist to cook the eggs or even to oversee their production. This fact ensures the survival of the work beyond the lifetime of the artist, as long as her instructions survive and are acted upon, as it can be continually remade without her contribution. The other - vegetable - elements of Lucas’ work along with the Kebab, were replaced regularly at the discretion of the gallery.

Another example of the use of ephemeral material for the production of a reconstructable work is *Cacao* (1994) by Helen Chadwick. *Cacao* is a mechanical fountain in which liquid chocolate bubbles and swirls, and it is not an ephemeral artwork despite the ephemeral nature of the materials used.

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3 This information was provided by Darren Pih, Assistant Curator, at the Tate Liverpool, in a telephone conversation of 4/4/2006.

4 There are other examples of artist providing instructions for making their work rather than a finished piece. Hans-Ulrich Obrist curated an exhibition of work made from instructions, *Do It*; there is also a catalogue of the same title which accompanied the exhibition. Obrist is also involved with the web-based project, e-flux.com, which provides artists’ instructions and invites visitors to make the works and contribute an image of their version. There are two distinct groups of artists who provide instructions; firstly there are those whose work is executed by a specific group of assistants, for example Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings. The second group are those whose work can be made by anyone, for example Lygia Clark’s *Caminhando* (1964). I will return to this subject in relation to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres whose Candy Spill series are made from instructions.
This work is intended to be maintained at a level of perfection that requires constant intervention on the part of the exhibiting institution. It exists for a specific length of time to the same extent that any temporary exhibition does and at the end of the exhibition period is dismantled. The demise or decay of the work is not an element in the piece so despite the transient nature of the material the work is temporary rather than ephemeral. It could in fact be permanently exhibited if a venue and funding were available. Chadwick joked that it could be “A centrepiece at Cadbury world, possibly. Bankside maybe . . .”5 In the case of both these works the effort required to maintain the chocolate of Cacao and the replacement of the fried eggs in the work of Sarah Lucas can be seen as a consequence of ‘wear and tear’ rather than an inherent vi These works are permanently reconstructable as long as the technology and the will are in place to keep chocolate in liquid form and to fry eggs. It is clear from the outset what intervention these works would require to be exhibitable.

Works that fall into my third category are those made from experimental material the artist did not intend to decay, but as a result of the unknown quality of the material deteriorated. These accidentally ephemeral works possess a latent defect. These works problematic for collecting institutions and are a growing category of works as artists

Unconventional and untested materials. Expanded Expansion (1969) by Eve Hesse is an
interesting example of the accidentally ephemeral not least because it has generated considerable
discussion within the conservation community.

From 1967, Hesse chose to work with Latex rubber and the following year she introduced
fibreglass into her repertoire of materials. She chose to use these materials in her sculpture for
their expressive poetic qualities not because these materials would eventually disintegrate. When
Hesse was made aware of the instability of the materials she had chosen she decided to continue
using them. These works are now the subject of debate in the conservation world, concerning the
point at which an artwork is no longer exhibitable. In November 2000, the organizers of an
exhibition of Hesse’s work convened a discussion among curators, conservators, and Hesse’s
friends to discuss the problems surrounding the exhibition of her work. One of the pieces viewed
at the course of the discussion was Expanded Expansion (1969), a fibreglass, latex, and
cheesecloth piece. The translucent latex coated cheesecloth section draped between more rigid
fibreglass supports. The work leaned against the wall. The work is now entirely rigid and darkly
darkened and cannot be removed from its crate for fear of further damage. It no longer has any
of its original qualities and merely acts as a reminder or relic of what it once was and what has
been lost.

One of the issues raised was how to determine what Hesse would accept in the way of
deterioration were she still alive. The material available about Hesse’s work and the remarks she
is reported to have made in conversation suggest that she was sympathetic to the idea of
transience and that she would have been happy with the ephemeral nature of her work. However, this is supposition; we do not know this for a fact. Hesse may not have started out with the deliberate intention to create an ephemeral work but once she became aware of the inherent vulnerability of the materials she was using, she continued to use them. Artists do not always work with one eye on their legacy and with the clear intention of creating a body of work to leave behind after their death. Eve Hesse died young, and like many young artists her work demonstrates a desire to experiment. If the criterion of art is durability, then these experimental works would be deemed a failure by virtue of being inadequately constructed. However, if a different standard of success is used, such as a contribution to knowledge of materials, or aesthetic success at the moment of production then these works would be viewed differently. Not only does this work exemplify the accidentally ephemeral but it also indicates the close relationship between inherent vice and the relevance of an awareness of the artist’s directive intent.

The fourth category of the destruction of art objects includes works that are wilfully destroyed as a political gesture. This group of works is extremely interesting and deserves an entirely separate enquiry so I will not deal with it here other than to note some aspects that relate to this thesis. The destruction of permanent monuments and artefacts as an act of aggression, defiance, or military or political victory demonstrates the symbolic power of these structures to cultural identity and the relationship between artifacts and power and authority. Attacks on such works can be seen as a desperate attempt to assault the ‘sacred’ object which a culture views as significant to its identity or the desire to efface the memory of an oppressive regime. There are obvious recent examples including the literal toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad broadcast around the world, and the ‘graveyards’ of Soviet sculptures that now exist in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The vulnerability of works of art in wartime is so great that they are covered by the Hague convention (1954) which undertakes to “prohibit, prevent and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any act of vandalism directed against, cultural property.”

Works in the fifth category are made from material that one would not expect to decay but have an inherent vice not related to their physicality. These works are ephemeral but their

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6 Hesse discussed the vulnerability of her work in an interview with Cindy Nemser, Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists
Ephemeral works may not always be evident. The use of potentially durable materials to create ephemeral works can lead to confusion with regards to the demise of the work. These works in the first category are ephemeral but the ephemeral nature can relate to an aspect on the work other than materials. This confusion was evident in the work *House* by Rachel Whiteread.

Rachel Whiteread cast the inside of a Victorian terraced house in Grove Road in London. The structure of the house itself was removed leaving the solid form of the interior negative space of the house. While efforts were made to extend the life of the work, it was demolished one hundred and sixty-three days after Whiteread first started working on site, and seventy-seven days after the work was completed. *House* was a site-specific art work and so, dependent on its site. While 173 Grove Road was not the first site considered for the piece, the work that *House* was eventually to become would have been different were it sited somewhere else. By this I do not imply mean in appearance, obviously, the cast of another house would have been visually different but the totality of the work *House*, the negotiation and controversy that surrounded it, was dependent on being in the Grove Road site. I would argue in this case that the inherent vice of *House* was the site and therefore that it is an ephemeral artwork regardless of the potential viability of the piece. *House* was also time specific, more so than other art works - it is true to say that most works of art rely on being made in a particular time, the ephemeral artwork *House* was a product of a specific set of cultural responses to art and political circumstances at the time of its construction.
The original intention was that this work should be temporary or ephemeral, although a clear distinction was not made between these terms. Over time there was a groundswell of opinion in favour of the view that the work should be permanent, changing the original intention of the artist. David Thistlewood in his article “Reflections on the Demolition of House” refers to the desire for the preservation of House as a confusion of the artist’s intentionality rather than the development of it. In the case of a commissioned public work there are several intentions involved; the artist’s intention, the intention of the commissioning body (here, Artangel), the sponsor’s intention, the intention of the local council, the newspapers’ intentions, the intention of political parties and the intentions of the public who involved themselves in the debate. Somewhere among all these possible conflicting intentions, there may well be confusion. This is not an argument for ignoring the various intentions but in fact for being aware of them all and still being able to see the work. This conflict is not specifically related to the ephemerality of the work but is often the fate of commissioned public works.

The chronology of House has the characteristics of an operatic tragedy. One knows from the outset that the main character is doomed, as hostile circumstance conspire against them [tragic heroes are often said to have a ‘tragic flaw’ – one quality that dooms them – an inherent vice in fact]. And, as with tragic drama, knowing the outcome of this narrative does not make rereading of this tale any less fascinating. The analogy with a tragedy can be extended to include the cast of characters, the heroes and villains who populate this tale, the frantic media coverage, the drama of the Turner prize and political manoeuvrings leading to a climactic destruction. On 23rd November 1993, the Turner Prize jury decided to award the prize to Rachel Whiteread and Bow Neighbourhood councillors voted to demolish House. The extensive press coverage of House, the chronological press bibliography given in House lists 249 separate articles between September 1993 and May 1994, reflects the place the artwork had in the public consciousness at the time and has become part of the memory of the work.

Concrete is not an emotionally charged material nor does it have the art historical value of alabaster or bronze. It is associated with modernity and functionality, with building bridges and car parks. A few architects have incorporated fair-faced concrete into their work, but they are rare exceptions. On the surface, the use of concrete to memorialise a Victorian house may seem incongruous, however in the process of casting the concrete collects the memory of the house. As

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9 James Lingwood director of Artangel said in a Times article 27/11/1993 “Permanence has never been our ambition, though it might have been our dream.” (my emphasis)
the concrete is being sprayed into the building and covers the internal space, it touches every inch, every crevice, capturing every surface in its memory. The image that is evoked is reminiscent of Mieke Bal’s description of the *Morgue* series of photographs by Andres Serrano. Serrano’s images, which should be shocking, are extraordinarily loving, and as Bal suggests, through the camera lens, gives the subjects of the photographs the attention they may have lacked in life. Bal’s description is powerfully physical and provides access to works that could be difficult to approach because of their distressing subject matter:

The abject dead body becomes a powerful monument, brought to life by the ‘maternal love’ – the slowed-down look that grazes the object, caresses it, and surrounds it with care of the camera that dignifies it.

Throughout this research, one idea that has resurfaced in every section is the fact that we are attached to objects, and the requirement that certain objects should be permanent is a dominant feature of our culture. No other object illustrates this as powerfully as our attachment to our houses. The terms ‘homeless’ and ‘of no fixed abode’ refer to far more than simply not having a house. The 1980s in Britain was the era of greatly increased home ownership. Council tenants were encouraged to buy their rented properties through the ‘right to buy’ scheme. People lavish attention on their houses, they decorate, alter, ‘dress’, and improve them. People watch television programmes that show how to ‘makeover’, sell and clean houses, and they show the houses of the rich and famous as if it were a glimpse into their intimate lives. In the register of things that cause most stress, the three life events that people find most difficult are death, divorce, and moving house. There is an obvious financial reason for feeling stressed when moving house but like the other two life events there is an element of loss – the life lived in the house. *House* memorialises this powerful relationship we have with the building we inhabit, the intimate lived lives inside houses - the underneath side of the windowsill, the profile of a skirting board, the contours of a light switch. The apparently cold and unresponsive concrete gives attention to all these details as one would to a person one loves.

In the opening section of *House*, a video made by Artangel as part of its *Afterlives* series, which included passages from Whiteread’s own video diary, there is no accompanying voiceover, no attempt at interpretation, simply the empty house. The silence prevents the piece from being sentimental. This is not a romantic memorial to happy family life, there is no suggestion of what type of life was lived here, it is naked bricks and mortar, garish wallpaper, clashing carpet. The

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choice of the word 'house' as the title rather than 'home', reinforces this unsentimental view. The lack of narration and interpretation creates a gap between what is being memorialised and the anti-memorial created, and in the gap the viewer can personalize the piece. One can reflect on the housing problems of the East End of London and from there to the larger issue of housing, our own experience of houses, our connection to place, our feelings of belonging or not belonging, our ideas of safety—'being on home ground'. It is however more difficult to view houses simply as sites of family and security; the danger of family life is thrust upon us through child abuse awareness campaigns, "When home is where the hurt is.".

Whiteread explored the presence of the person through absence. House is the space we occupy, an almost magical space we do not see. In the cast interior space of House there is the presentation of an intimate and private space in a very public space. The word façade refers not only to the front of a building, its outward appearance; it also refers to the outward appearance of a person, particularly a deceptive front. In House the façade is literally removed, it has no front and it stood, naked, exposed, and vulnerable.

In much of the literature surrounding House, the tragedy of the work is its destruction. However, the destruction of the work is consistent with its inner logic and is not the tragedy itself but the final act in a tragedy. Had the work survived it would have faced the fate risked by all public art works, that of becoming invisible. Andreas Huyssen explores this suspect aspect of monuments in his book Present Past: Urban Palimpsests and The politics of Memory. Huyssen speaking of post-unification Berlin and the 'monument mania', which was prevalent at the end of the twentieth century states that:

The monumental is aesthetically suspect because it is tied to the nineteenth-century bad taste, to kitsch, and to mass culture. It is politically suspect because it is seen as representative of nineteenth-century nationalism and twentieth-century totalitarianisms. It is socially suspect because it is the privileged mode of expression of mass movements and mass politics. It is ethically suspect because in its preference for bigness it indulges in the larger-than-human, in the attempt to overwhelm the individual.

Whiteread's House was not guilty of the aesthetic and political failings of monuments as described by Huyssen, in fact, it was so far from the nineteenth-century expression of nationalism and twentieth-century totalitarianism to be truly an anti-monument. However, over time House would have been absorbed into the category of monument and public sculpture and become part of the urban palimpsest.
of the environment, becoming a ‘landmark’ as war memorials have become. It would thus, for most people, most of the time, have disappeared. According to John Dewey this disappearance is a fate of all artworks that achieve classic status. It is not that the works are not there but that the status attached to the work, the history of appreciation and admiration prevent the viewer from seeing the work for themselves, and so it becomes isolated from our experiences. By being demolished House reached a poetic conclusion and guaranteed that it would always remain in perfect condition, like a person who ‘shall not grow old’ and remains perfect in memory, before time has had a chance to do its work. Rather than mourn the destruction of one of the most significant piece of sculpture made in Britain at the end of the 20th century, we should be looking to how the archive of the work and the surrounding literature can be made accessible. These ‘remains’ could be exhibited along side the other works of that era, not purporting to be works of art in themselves but as valid as other type of documentation, e.g. photographs of land art and recordings of performances. This work highlights the function and functioning of archives of ephemeral art and how works that have disappeared can still function as communicative acts independent of the physical presence of the object.

Works in the final category are the subject of this dissertation. These are works that are conceived and exhibited with the explicit intension that they should decay or disappear. They are generally made from transient materials and the disappearance through decay is an intrinsic element of the work. When viewed as art objects ephemeral works are considered to be physically vulnerable and this is generally the focus of discussion: I suggest that far more significantly, they are conceptually vulnerable. Unless their status as communicative acts rather than art objects is recognised and the value of the relationship between these works and time is considered, ephemeral work becomes vulnerable. Rather than focus on their physical fragility I will concentrate on the risk that these works face when they become part of a ‘permanent’ collection. ‘Conserving’ ephemeral art in a way which responds to the full meaning of the work may well mean allowing them to follow their course towards disappearance, but recording the process as faithfully as possible to preserve its meaning. Thus conserving such works will involve conserving that aspect of the work that might appear to be of least interest to a profession dedicated to the preservation of physical objects.

I would now like to focus on the response of art institutions to works that disappear. As is obvious from the preceding examples there is a pressing need to understand which works are

\[12\] Dewey op cit p 3
intended by the artist to be ephemeral and which are intended to be permanent. Once works become part of a collection they become the responsibility of conservators and in this chapter I will examine the output of several conferences and initiatives which discuss the issues raised by the conservation of contemporary art objects and more particularly Ephemeral Art. Throughout this discussion I will use both the terms ephemeral art and contemporary art. These terms are not interchangeable but the issues that apply to ephemeral art may well apply to other forms of contemporary art. Often the texts to which I refer do not discuss ephemeral art specifically because this form of expression is not recognised as a separate area of art that needs consideration, but as a quality of some artworks.

The conferences examined include: Saving the 20th Century: The Conservation of Modern materials (1991); From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture (1995); Modern Art: Who Cares (1997); Mortality Immortality: The legacy of Twentieth Art (1998). These conferences took place in Canada, England, Holland, and the U.S.A., demonstrating the international nature of these concerns. There is a significant number of institutional initiatives and networks involved in promoting and discussing the conservation of contemporary art. The International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INNCA) is a network for the conservation community supported by the European Commission. The Raphael Programme is a similar initiative1999, based in Amsterdam. Their stated aims are to “facilitate the exchange of information collected in museums of modern art by means of a website and database and collect information direct from the artists by means of interviews”.13 The Variable Media Initiative set up by the Guggenheim seeks to consult with artists on strategies for the preservation of variable media artwork (installation, performance, interactive, digital).14 The Artist Documentation Project is an initiative of Harvard University Art Museum’s new Centre for the Technical Study of Modern Art. The project is overseen by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro who is a founding director of the Centre and director of conservation at the Whitney Museum, which is a partner in the project. The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art was set up in 1996 by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage.

13 http://www.incca.org
14 The term, ‘variable media’ was first used by Jon Ippolito, Artist and Assistant Curator at the Guggenheim, New York, in his 1998 essay, ‘The Museum of the Future: A Contradiction in Terms?’ which first appeared in Artbyte June/July 1998 to refer to the inclusion of an element of variability in the artwork. This varied from artist to artist but allowed the destruction and reconstruction of a piece.
As well as examining the output of these conferences and initiatives, I will look at why we conserve, the decision-making process involved in conservation and why Ephemeral Art requires a different decision-making model to more traditional art forms. I will also look at the rights of the artist and conservation and the law. Finally, I will look at artistic reputation in relation to ephemeral art. Conservation and reputation are inextricably linked. Contemporary artworks are rarely anonymous unless anonymity is a conscious element in the conceptual framework that makes up an artwork. The rise and fall of an artist’s reputation and the fate of their work operate in tandem. In Rubbish Theory terms - that is worldview prior to action – a person is famous therefore their work is preserved. The reverse is also true - action prior to worldview - because a work is conserved a person is remembered.

“"If we do not preserve the art of today for tomorrow’s audience, their knowledge and experience of our culture will be, sadly, impoverished." Conservation is a political issue. Roy Perry, Head of Conservation at the Tate, describes the decision to purchase as the first act of conservation. It is a category shift, from transient or even rubbish to durable. But, who decides which artworks are purchased and therefore preserved, and what are their motives – financial, political, personal, or professional? Curators, collectors, and institutions stake their reputations on the success of the artists they have chosen to champion. This can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Tate Modern or Charles Saatchi, by buying an artist’s work, make that artist collectable. The politics of who is and isn’t collected is a subject for another research project, but the uncollectability of ephemeral art is relevant to my focus, as is the case for ephemeral art being recorded, documented, and preserved in some form. As Roy Perry says, the knowledge of our culture will be ‘impoverished’ if this particular type of art disappears without trace. Despite the apparent contradiction inherent in the subject - the conservation of ephemeral art - for the purposes of this section of my investigation I will assume that at least some works of ephemeral art achieves a quality which means that they deserve to be included in the archives of art history as much as any other movement or form. However what does differ is how this inclusion takes place. Not only does the conservation of ephemeral art require new methods it also requires a new philosophy, a new ethical understanding of why we conserve artwork and for whom. If the work is to be preserved for future generations is that sufficient justification for making it unavailable for this generation? If this is the case when will the work be available? Jon Ippolito asks if the ‘Museum of the Future’ is a contradiction in terms? He argues that museums are sites
of dead objects and these do not sit with the concept of future. However, drawing on the experience of conceptual artists from the 60s and 70s, Ippolito suggests that a new model of conservation can be created which will incorporate the concept of variance.

The very notion of preserving art objects in controlled environments away from the dangers of public use is the antithesis of the fundamental objectives of ephemeral art. Works that specifically incorporate interactivity, performativity, experience and the dematerialisation of the art-object require a new understanding of the relationship between the viewer and the object, and the role of the institution in presenting the object to the public. Rather than distorting ephemeral art to meet the requirement of 19th century methods of acquisition and display, collecting institutions should devise a response appropriate to the nature of the art produced.

What is it about ephemeral art that creates ethical difficulties? As soon as the first artist included an element of 'non-art' material in an artwork the relationship between material and meaning became ambiguous and fluid. Traditionally, the material in an artwork was the means by which the work was executed and a change of materials would not cause an alteration of meaning. However in contemporary art not only is there a link between material and meaning but also this meaning is individually determined, i.e. it will be different for each artist and for each piece of work by any artist. When we refer to an 'artwork' it is no longer an autonomous physical object but can refer to a performance, an event, a sound piece etc. in effect it can refer to a category as varied as the group 'artists' or the term 'medium'. This exploding of the term 'artwork' to encompass whatever the artist defines as such, even the process of decay, is discussed more fully in the chapter dealing with communicative act.

Bearing in mind this redefinition from artwork to communicative act we can now look at the issues this raises for conservation. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) code of ethics the first priority of the museum and the conservator must be to the object. The primary duty of the museum is to preserve its collections for the future and use them for the development and dissemination of knowledge, through research, educational work, permanent display, temporary exhibitions and other special activities. These should be in accordance with the stated policy and educational purpose of the museum, and should not compromise either the quality or the proper care of the collection.

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17 ICOM Code of ethics for Museums 2.9
Nowhere in the ICOM document is there a requirement to consult the artist with regard to the treatment of their work. This may be based on the assumption that the vast majority of works in museum collection are not the work of living artists. In limited circumstances, the institution does have a legal obligation to consult the artist; this will be covered in the section that deals with conservation and the law. Contemporary artists tend to use a personal set of references rather than a general iconography. Knowledge of one artist's work will not necessarily throw light on the meaning of the work of one of their contemporaries. While there are many views about 'the intentional fallacy', and the importance of the artist's intentions (conscious or unconscious) in making a specific work, in relation to whether or not it is meant to be enduring or ephemeral, the only source of authoritative information regarding the artwork may well be the artist him or her self, or very close associates. The artist can only be consulted during their lifetime or with reference to materials they leave behind.

It is apparent that, within the general principle of preservation for posterity, there are no hard and fast rules governing the conservation of contemporary art and that decisions have to be made on a case by case basis. To arrive at a decision it may be necessary to take into account the artist's intention (insofar as it can be determined), the security, and preservation of the work and the preservation of an art-historical document. These considerations are often at odds with each other and when there is a conflict, it can be problematic deciding which consideration has priority – as well as deciding who decides? While there are no rules, there are clear guidelines such as the Variable Media Questionnaire.

The variable media questionnaire is an interactive form linked to a database and designed to assist artists and museum staff in writing variable media guidelines. The questionnaire is not intended to be exhaustive, but is intended to spur questions that must be answered in order to capture artists' desires about how to translate their work into new mediums once the work's original medium has expired.  

In order to begin a discussion of vulnerable and transient artworks the Variable Media Initiative (VMI) had firstly to develop a set of terms and a vocabulary. This highlights the ambiguous nature of many of the terms we use to describe art. Rather than defining artworks in media specific terms they used the term 'behaviours', which are medium-independent attributes and from these they attempted to develop 'strategies' approaches to translating a work for the future. The terms themselves give an insight into the possible options for the treatment of an artwork and

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18 http://www.variablemedia.net/e/welcome.html

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to clarify subtle distinctions within these options. Under the heading of Variable Media Behaviour there are several categories which identify elements which might not be considered part of the art work. These include contained, installed, performed, and interactive. The most obvious example of contained is the framing of a work. Installed refers to the relationship between the site and the work. Performed refers not only to the traditional forms of performance; music, dance and performance art but any work in which the process is as important as the product. Interactive, in this context usually refers to electronic media but can also mean installations that allow visitors to manipulate or take home components of a physical artwork.

Having established the variable media behaviour of a work the next step would be to determine the appropriate “Variable Media Strategy” which is one of several philosophical approaches to solving a particular preservation issue. The options they identify for are work are: Migration which involves upgrading equipment and source material, Duplication: which is the creation of a work which would be indistinguishable from the original, a clone; “Emulation” which would be a way of imitating the original look of a piece by completely different means; Reinterpretation, which is the most radical preservation strategy and involves a re-imagining of the work each time it is re-created; Reproduction, which is a copy that results in a loss of quality, and finally Storage which could involve buying up a supply of materials which could become obsolete from which the work could be reconstituted. This is considered the most conservative collecting strategy by the VMI.

Each of these strategies is in some way problematic and could possibly be considered contentious even if sanctioned by the artist. Some of these strategies can involve a substantial change in the visual appearance of the work, as for example when the technology undergoes an evolutionary jump, as when cathode-ray tubes give way to flat screen T.V.s or monitors. Reinterpretation is obviously a dangerous technique and warrants a discussion of the status of a new work and who does the re-interpreting. Does the new work become collaboration between the artist who produced the original work and the re-interpreter?

Many of these issues relate to new media works but the philosophical implications for other types of ephemeral art are the same. It is possible that while well-meaning this initiative is missing the point of the works they are discussing. The focus is on preserving the physical presence of the work when the vulnerability of the object may be precisely the focus of the work. While it was not the original intention of the questionnaire, one of the consequences of the questionnaire is that it could focus the minds of artists rather than record the decisions that had been made. This interaction between museums and artists might avoid situations like the conflict
surrounding the work of Eve Hesse but also may be of benefit to artists in the development of their work. While this approach allows the institution to collect the information to make an informed decision it does not prescribe a solution. In order to understand how this information can be used it is necessary to look at the decision making process.

At the conference Modern Art: Who Cares? Renee van de Vall addressed the issue of decision making in his presentation “Painful Decisions: Philosophical Considerations on a Decision-Making Model” Van de Vall quotes the example of the decision Agamemnon is forced to make between taking the life of his daughter and risking his men by evoking the wrath of Zeus. This example was also used by Martha Nussbaum to illustrate a predicament in which the choice is between two outcomes that are morally undesirable – a tragic conflict in which the choice is between the lesser of two evils. Nussbaum’s position, that values cannot always be compared and ordered in such a way as to make a reasoned outcome possible is in conflict with the traditional view. She held the Aristotelian view that values are ‘plural and non commensurable’ and therefore decisions will have to be made between conflicting values of equal importance. In arriving at a decision some compromise may be required, some sacrifice of values might have to be made. For example, in the conservation of the Lygia Clark’s Bichos, the artist’s intention that the work should be interactive was sacrificed in favour of the preservation of a historical document.

Van de Vall describes the thinking of a theoretical working group that used a decision-making model based on an earlier one devised by Ernst van de Wetering (de Wetering’s model was developed to address decision making in relation to ‘traditional’ art.) and Rik van Wegen. They chose not to construct a theory on the specific nature of contemporary non-traditional works of art and then formulate certain general principles to guide future conservation decision, but to assemble a series of difficult, practical examples. By so doing, they hoped to be able to reach more general conclusions.

This method followed the Aristotelian model which:

denies that rational moral choice can be encapsulated in a system of general rules or principles that can then be applied by means of a process of logical deduction to

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20 ‘Painful Decisions: Philosophical Considerations on a Decision-Making Model’ Van de Val
subsequent new situations. Instead it starts from concrete situational judgements of a more informal and intuitive kind to which certain universality is given.\textsuperscript{21} The ability to make sound judgements lies with the ability to see the different elements clearly. This is what Nussbaum means when she says 'discernment rests with perception'.\textsuperscript{22} This ability can be partly innate, but it also can be developed with the help of casuistry. Casuistry is defined as "the case-analysis approach to the interpretation of general moral rules".\textsuperscript{23} This requires the development of taxonomy of cases with each case having been considered in its own right. However how does one check the decisions? Casuistry has, in the past, had a poor reputation because of the possibility of making bad decision based on cleverly argued falsehoods.

The group identified three points that conservators should be aware of at the outset of the deliberation process. The first of these is an awareness of incommensurable values, such as access to interactive works versus the risk of damage. Secondly, they emphasise the necessity of compromise, as it is unlikely that all values can be accommodated equally. Finally, they highlighted an extremely important consideration of historic variations in preference. The awareness that another group of conservators in another place or time may come to a different decision is significant with regard to reversibility and the documentation of any conservation intervention.\textsuperscript{24} Having set out the basic ground-rules the group devised a seven set model that could be used when making a decision. Information could be collated under the following headings: Data Registration, Condition, Meaning, Discrepancy, Conservation Options, Consideration, and Proposed Treatment. Most of these headings are self-explanatory and pretty much 'common sense'. Data Registration involves collecting all available material about the artist and the production of the work and the materials used. The group stress the importance of collecting material that related to the artists personal iconography and recording non-physical elements of the work, such as motion and sound in installations. Condition is the scientific analysis of the condition of the piece. Meaning is interesting because this area has the added complication that meaning is often ambiguous and can be attached to a work not because of a particular intention or instruction on the part of an artist but because of context, the moment in time in which the work was created. A recent example of this is Damien Hirst's The Physical

\textsuperscript{21} ibid
\textsuperscript{22} Nussbaum, Martha C. Love's Knowledge Essays on Philosophy and Literature, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990 p 66
\textsuperscript{24} ICOM Code of Ethics 6.5 "All conservation procedures should be documented and reversible."
"Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living," (1991). This work now has an iconic value beyond the meaning of the actual piece. Interestingly this has become synonymous with its collector as well as with the artist. Discrepancy refers to the gap between the condition of the artwork and the meaning of the work. This assessment will lead to a diagnosis of the conservation problem. The group offer the following question as a diagnostic aid - "Does the meaning of the work change as a result of the aging, damage or decay it has sustained such that intervention must be considered?" This consideration highlights the fact the identical damaged to two pieces may not have the same diagnosis. The example the group gave is a scratch to a piece by Donald Judd would be considered damage and where as the same scratch on a piece by Carl Andre would not alter the meaning of the work. This section is subdivided further into aesthetic, authenticity, historicity, and functionality. A conservation option involves taking advice from relevant experts, material experts, and scientists to gather a range of conservation options. Consideration includes many aspects of the work that are not an intrinsic element of the work but are values the work may have acquired such as historicity and functionality, as well as the importance of the work, and financial and technical limitations, restoration ethics and legal aspects. After all these elements are considered there should be a proposed treatment. The treatment plan should be documented as well as the decision making process and the motivation for the decision. This is important bearing in mind the already mentioned likelihood of a different decision being made by a different group at a different time.25

This discussion may appear somewhat abstract and so I would now like to look at conservation as it relates to the two of the works that are the subject of this study - Zoë Leonard’s Strange Fruit(for David) and Felix Gonzales Torres’ Untitled (for Dad). Both of these works will be discussed in greater detail in the second half of this dissertation but for the moment I will focus on the conservation issues. In both cases the artist was involved in the decision making process with regard to the future existence of their works. The decision-making models described above suggest that there are possibly as many outcomes as there are works of art. The flexibility within this approach and the idea that the outcome is individually determined shows an extraordinary amount of creativity on the part of the curators and conservators involved.

25 The information relating to the Decision-making Model is taken from "The Decision-making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art produced by the Foundation for Conservation of Modern Art."
At the conference, Ann Temkin presented Leonard’s *Strange Fruit (for David)* as a case study. She described the thinking leading up to and the process involved in the ‘conservation’ of the work. Leonard made *Strange Fruit (for David)* between 1993 and 1998. In 1995, she exhibited the work in her apartment. In 1997 she exhibited it at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami and in the summer of the same year at the Kunsthalle Basel. Leonard’s dealer, Paula Cooper, suggested preserving the work and Leonard worked with the German conservator Christian Scheidemann for two years on attempting to arrest the decay of the piece. They finally came up with a process of Shock freezing the piece and then penetrating them with Paraloid B72 under vacuum. It was necessary to protect the non-fruit elements from the Paraloid B72, which is an illustration the difficulty of mixed media pieces, namely, different materials require different methods of conservation. Leonard was unhappy with the results as the work now had the appearance of decay but was no longer actually decaying. She decided to stop the conservation experiments and opted for the honesty of decay. When the piece was purchased by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the museum came to an arrangement with Leonard (some of this was informal) that they would endeavour to show the work at regular intervals, to photograph the work, or permit Leonard to photograph successive installations. The agreement in effect meant a long collaboration with the artist. This process of working closely with an artist to both understand their materials and the philosophies that guide their decision making led Temkin to conclude that the institution needed to reassess its relationship with artists. “We live in a time when the museum is much more engaged with its public, so why not with its artists?” While Temkin was willing to accommodate the work, her colleagues felt differently about it. They were, according to Leonard “freaked out” and were disinclined to assign a number to the artwork, revealing the misconception that ascribing a number was tantamount to a guarantee that the work would last forever.

This disinclination to assign a number to the artwork illustrates the difficult position that conservators can find themselves in. In the *ICOM Code of Ethics* conservators are constrained by

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26 At the time of the conference Ann Temkin was Curator of 20th-century Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
certain obligations to ensure the permanence of the collection and are prohibited from acquiring works that cannot be preserved.

Each museum should adopt and publish a written statement of its collections policy. This policy should address issues relevant to the care and use of the museum’s existing public collections. It should state clearly the areas of purposed collecting and include guidelines for maintaining the collections in perpetuity. Instructions should also be included in the policy on acquisitions with conditions or limitations (see 3.5) as well as a restriction against acquiring material that cannot be catalogued, conserved, stored, or exhibited properly.29 [my emphasis]

Leonard reached an agreement with the museum which meant the conservators would respect the spirit of the piece but devise a storage method that would ensure so far as was practical that while the work was in storage it would be protected from decay. Temkin concluded her presentation with a passionate reminder to her colleagues. She stated; “In a museum, it often seems, we are dedicated to preserving something larger than individual works of art: we are dedicated to preserving the fiction that works of art are fixed and immortal.”30 Temkin argued that although the work is moving toward its inevitable death “it may be more alive for viewers than many objects that are apparently fixed and never-changing”.31 She also felt the questions raised about the ethics of the work Strange Fruit (for David) had larger social implications about intervention and allowing nature to take its course. This is a sentiment that is echoed in much of the language of conservation. Many of the publication and conference titles refer to life and death and draw parallels between the relationship of artworks to conservators and patients with their doctors, reinforcing the conclusion drawn from my research into Death Denial and Terror Management Theory, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Although this work created ethical dilemmas for the museum professionals as it conflicted with some areas of the ICOM Code of Ethics, the code itself does allow for exceptions to these rules to accommodate living collections:

Special considerations may apply to certain kinds of specialised institutions, such as “living” or “working” museums and some teaching and other educational museums. Museums and other institutions that display living specimens, such as botanical and

29 ICOM Code of Ethics 3.1
30 Temkin, Ann. op cit p 50
31 ibid
zoological gardens and aquaria, may find it necessary to regard at least part of their collection as replaceable or renewable.\textsuperscript{32}

One possibility is that this 'aliveness' as described by Temkin would suggest categorizing ephemeral art with living collections rather than 'permanent collections'. This is not as outlandish a suggestion as it may seem at first. In his conference presentation 'Conceptual Art Is Not what It Seems'\textsuperscript{33} Dominic McIvers Lopes addressed the failure of appreciation of conceptual art. He attributes this failure not to any failing on the part of Conceptual Art but as a result of misclassification. If conceptual art is classified, for example, with painting, and we apply our knowledge of the category painting to that work then we will fail to appreciate the work.\textsuperscript{34}

At the beginning of this section, I stated that for the moment I would work on the assumption that ephemeral art should be preserved. I would now like to address that assumption. There is an obvious contradiction inherent in the attempt to conserve the ephemeral. Artists who make intentionally ephemeral work have made a series of decisions that have brought them to the point of producing work that will disappear. Zoë Leonard’s decision to allow her work *Strange Fruit* (for David) to rot seem completely consistent with the concept of the work, the allusion to the cycle of life and death, and in the repair our attempts to go on living with this knowledge. Would the work frozen in its decay have adequately illustrated the same concerns? There are two related issues involved in this decision and these relate to my original definition of ephemeral art.

Firstly, the work incorporates decay, which is a process. When preserved the process ceases, one sees just one moment of the decay. The element of time is removed. Secondly there was immediacy in the materials chosen by Leonard. In her description of the production of the work the viewer is given an insight into the artist’s emotional state as she attempted to restore life to the empty fruit. In this there is an honesty of emotion, and the materials reflect this. Would the work have the same honesty if, rather than being *Strange Fruit* it was *Shock-frozen Strange Fruit and Paraloid B72* Without the painstaking efforts of the curator, conservator and the artist this work might have been wrongly preserved and thus destroyed. However, does this mean that once the process of decay is complete *Strange Fruit* will be swept up and never heard of again. Preservation of the actual object is only one means of preserving the legacy of a piece. This work has been significant in the evolution of conservators thinking on the best practice form the

\textsuperscript{32} ICOM Code of Ethics 4.1 General Presumption of Permanence of Collection op cit,

\textsuperscript{33} This paper was presented at the conference Philosophy and Conceptual Art. Kings College, London.

\textsuperscript{34} An example of reclassification of an ephemeral will be discussed in detail in chapter 4.
conservation of ephemeral work. It is well documented through photography and verbal record and will become part of the ephemeral art archive.

Both these case studies looked at the work of artists who addressed the issue of ‘conservation’ in their lifetime. I have noticed that the issues shift subtly when an artist dies and they can no longer be consulted. While this is rarely mentioned explicitly it is alluded to by much of the literature. This fact has a bearing on reputation and the efforts made by the artist in their lifetime to ensure the future success of their work after their death, which I will look at in more detail in the section on reputation. When an artist dies, obviously, they can no longer be consulted and so in any decision making process a certain amount of conjecture is required. This is true even if there is documentation and interviews, as these have to be interpreted by the conservators. In his presentation to the conference Modern Art, Who Cares? Ernst van de Wetering discussed “speeds of transformation”. He created a distinction between people who knew the artist and their work, assistants, conservators and curators and a conservator who enters the life of the object without having known the artist. He suggests that the priorities of the first wave conservators and the second will be different. For the first wave conservator the aim is to prolong the present, the ‘here and nowness’ of the work, while for the second wave the work has already become a historical document and the code of ethics come into play. In many of the articles in which conservators discuss the work of particular contemporary or modern artists, they first establish their relationship with the artist, in effect identifying themselves as a first or second wave conservators.

Van de Wetering suggests that the transformation in an artwork happens in two ways – there is the physical transformation of the artwork but also the transformation of perception that takes place in the mind of the viewer. This transformation can be a loss of meaning, e.g. the hanging of once sacred works of art in secular museums. Thomas M. Messer also refers to this loss of meaning in the closing of his presentation to the Mortality/Immortality conference;

In the end, there is no alternative to our acceptance of mortality – for individuals, generations, and the objects that represent them. Perhaps we may distinguish a little more between physical deterioration on the one hand and, on the other, expiration of relevance in a work of art – the process by which something that communicated meaning once is no longer capable of doing so. In the latter, more prevalent mode of fatality, there is very little that conservators can do.35

While Messer identifies the ephemerality of meaning as being of great importance his statement that "[T]here is very little a conservator can do" is contentious. In the two case studies above the co-operative between museum professional and the artists ensured the preservation of meaning in one case by allowing the work to rot and in the other by creating the framework by which the work can constantly be undated and remade. If as the ICOM Code of Ethics states the preservation of the art object is the primary function of the museum, when that object incorporates an element of change and a concept beyond that intrinsic to the materials used then the preservation of the meaning is the responsibility of the museum.

Institutions are morally obliged to conserve as broad a range of contemporary art as possible to leave future generations a true indication of the diversity of art being produced at the end of the 20th C and the beginning of the 21st. While there is no legal obligation to do so for the sake of intelligent and accurate conservation of contemporary art the intentions of the artist should be recorded and if not complied with at least preserved. The decisions as to how to preserve ephemeral art is complicated by the link between material and meaning and that this meaning is individually determined. When a conflict arises between the preservation of a historical document – an artwork, which reflects a moment in time and the possible use of the artwork then new strategies must be developed to allow the artwork to continue to ‘live’. The existence of the Variable Media Initiative suggests that the need for these strategies is being addressed and is an ongoing debate. This debate in itself along with the artwork may well be the legacy that ephemeral art leaves to future generations.

The decisions made in relation to art works may be governed by legal requirements. The copyright law also protects the bond between the artist and his or her creation. Copyright is awarded automatically to the artist/maker/author of an artwork regardless of quality. The detail of the law varies in the U.S. and Europe. Copyright law distinguishes between exploitation rights and moral rights, which are separate. An artist may sell the exploitation rights but retains the moral right. Exploitation right entitles the artist to be paid royalties for their work and any reproduction of the same and protects the artist from any unauthorised use of their work. Exploitation rights in Europe remain valid for seventy years after the artist’s death and fifty years in the U.S. Moral rights are attached to the person of the artist and therefore cannot be transferred to another during the artist’s lifetime. These are generally transferred to their heirs on the death of the artist. In some circumstance, they should be passed on in writing – in the form of a will. The

36 ibid
length of time for which they remain with the heir’s varies from country to country – in most of Europe they last for seventy years, in France these last in perpetuity, and in U.S. fifty years.

In the area of conservation, it is moral rights, which are of concern. These rights are non-commercial and protect the bond between artist and artwork. These give the artist the ‘right of integrity’ that is the right to prevent anyone from interfering with the work in a way that would be detrimental or prejudicial to the work. There is always the risk in conservation that the efforts of conservators may result in unintentional damage to the work.

Independently of the author’s economic right, and even after transfer of the said rights, the author shall have the right to claim authorship of the work and object to any distortion, mutilation or other modification of, or other derogatory action in relation to, the said work, which would be prejudicial to his honour and reputation.37

Other derogatory action does not include inappropriate exhibiting for example in an unsympathetic venue or interestingly the complete destruction of the work. An artist may view conservation of their work as distortion, mutilation or modification. In the case of ephemeral art – an artist may not want to have their work conserved however the conservators are obliged to conserve work as cultural property. Thomas K. Dreier, a specialist in international copyright law, discussed this issue in his conference presentation “Copyright aspects of the Preservation of Nonpermanent works of Modern Art”. Dreier believes that Articles 6 of the Berne Convention quoted above assumes two facts - that the work will not change over time and the artist does not wish it to. However these assumptions are not correct and are yet to be challenged in law.38

37 Moral rights in the Berne Convention Article 6 bis (1). While the Berne convention was first drawn up in 1886 it was over century before it was fully adopted in the U.S. The following is a chronology of major amendments to the Berne Convention.

1886 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works.
1928 Moral rights were added
1989 U.S. signed Berne convention without moral law element
1990 Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) to included moral law in U.S. (moral law only applied until the artist’s death.
1991 VARA came into effect but cannot be applied retroactively
1996 Berne Convention updated to include developments in new technology

38 Dreier, Thomas. Copyright Aspects of the Preservation of Nonpermanent works of Modern Art. in Corzo, Miguel Angel, (ed) Mortality Immortality the Legacy of 20th-century Art. p 65
In the U.S. this conflict is covered by The Visual Artists Right Act (VARA), which "deprives the artist of the opportunity to use the right of integrity to challenge the conservation or restoration of his or her work" paragraph 106(c)(2) States:

The modification of a work of visual art which is the result of conservation of the work is not a destruction, distortion, mutilation, or other modification described in subsection (a)(3) unless the modification is caused by gross negligence. VARA protect the work and prioritise it above the artist’s right of integrity. It protects the work as cultural property. VARA also distinguishes works on the bases of merit which copyright law does not do.

In Europe however, the bond between the artist and the artwork is paramount. So there is ample opportunity for conflict of interest between the artist and conservators. While copyright law states that particular care has to be taken with regard to works of art, it does not state what that care should be. Neither does it oblige a conservator to consult an artist prior to undertaking conservation. An artist in order to evoke their right of integrity must discover for themselves that the work has been interfered with in some way. Conservators may be likely under these circumstances to restore a work without consulting the artist to avoid possible conflict. The artist may not approve of the conservation method or conservation of their work in general. Alternative the artist may to carry out the conservation him or herself. This would be interesting but not always appropriate. An artist while having intimate knowledge of the work is not a conservator and not bound by a code of ethics. Their responsibility would be to their artistic output rather than to a specific piece and might take this opportunity to ‘improve’ the work. There may be a considerable time lapse between the creation of the work and the time of conservation and the artist style may have changed. The value of the work as a historical document created at a particular time in the development of the artist may well be lost.

While the conservator’s code of ethics obliges them to conserve the work as cultural property, when the work becomes the property of a private collector they are not governed by a code of ethic. If maintenance is to be carried out on an artwork or not carried out as in the case of ephemeral work this must be clearly stated and agreed upon in a contract with the purchaser.

The law in respect of site-specific work is very interesting. In Europe, there were two recent cases in which a change to the environment of the work was seen by the artist as

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59 The Visual Artists Right Act (VARA), paragraph 106(c)(2)
detrimental to their work. In 1993, Dye Devens protested against the erection of a fountain in a park where one of his sculptures was already sited. The work depended on visual play between the work and the site – the judge found in favour of the artist. In the second case Christine Chiffrun sited a bronze statue one kilometre away from the spot where Winkle Prins wrote his encyclopaedia. An imaginary line linked the statue and the site. The local rotary club decided to place a monument on the spot, which Chiffrun asserted, modified her work. The judge ruled against her as the contentious spot was a conceptual element in her work and copyright only protects that which can be “perceived by the senses”. This suggests that it is only the physical object that can be protected and not a concept.

Edible artworks are in a peculiar position – the law is hesitant to apply copyright to edible works as this could lead to copyright of actual dishes. Other exceptions include actions. While one has copyright over a number of single images, one does not have copyright over a sequence of images. In recent years there have several cases of design companies making short films to advertise produces relying heavily on art work e.g. VW, Honda and Guinness advertisements.

In every case, the artist has either lost or not pursued their case because of the debilitating cost of litigation and precedent suggests they are unlikely to be successful when attempting to claim copyright in relation to a sequence of images such as a film. Artists suing on the grounds of a single image being exploited have been comparatively more successful.

Finally I would like to look at the consequences and potential risks to an artist’s career if there work is ephemeral. If one were to take Lang and Lang’s ‘The Survival of Artistic Reputation’ as a lesson in how to be famous (which it is obviously not intended to be) then it would act as a cautionary tale for practitioners of ephemeral art practice. In this section, I would like to consider the role of the art object in the legacy of the artist and also the survival of an artist reputation in general.

In ‘Recognition and Renown: The Survival of Artistic Reputation’ G. E. Lang and K. Lang look at two aspects of reputation, that is recognition – acknowledgement of ones artistic

40 Beunen, Annemarie, 'Moral Rights in Modern Art: An International Survey', presented to the conference Modern Art: Who Cares?
42 for example Andy Goldsworthy reached on out of court settlement with the advertising agency devarieuxvillaret who had produced an advertising campaign that featured Habitat chairs emerging from melting snowballs strikingly similar to Goldsworthy’s “Midsummer Snowballs”. Goldsworthy claimed that the images suggest he was involved with the campaign. When the posters were hung in close proximity to his show the connection was reinforced.
merit by one's peers, and renown - the more general fame where one is known to people outside one's own area. They focus in particular on the survival of an artist's posthumous reputation and the efforts an artist can make in their own lifetime to ensure its success. They selected a group of artists whose work was equally meritorious but whose surviving reputation have been markedly different. While their area of analysis was artists working between 1880 and 1940 and who had achieved recognition as etchers their general reflections and conclusion vis-à-vis reputation are applicable to other areas of art production and other eras.

They are concerned with the survival of reputation in the 'collective memory' as opposed to information available to historians. They refer to Halwachs definition of collective memory as 'a living image of the past'. They align the survival of reputation in collective memory with the survival of tangible objects that recall the deceased and in particular the survival of the original works of art as a means of communicating with an artist across time. They argue that the efforts the artist makes in their lifetime to ensure the durability of their output is critical to the survival of their reputation. Without the art object the 'conditions of remembering' do not exist.

Movements, styles, media etc. come and go in fashion and the way works of the past are viewed in the present is more a matter of the concerns and the politics of the present that a quality intrinsic in the work of the past. However, as long as the actual works remain there is always the opportunity for rediscovery, rereading, and reinterpretation. The greatest benefit from the work can be achieved when a large body of work is kept together, thus facilitating research and major exhibitions.

Lang and Lang argue that it is not recognition but renown that ensure one's place in history. "Visibility, and particularly the degree of visibility that defines renown, provides the artist the sort of momentum that propels him [or her] into posterity." Renown attracts investors and collectors who are vital in the survival of the art object. Once an artist dies their reputation rest in the efforts of others, however, artists can make efforts in their lifetime to facilitate its posthumous existence. They identify five areas associated with the survival of reputation. One of these areas is an artist's efforts include producing a large body of work, which is easily recognisable as the work of the artist. They advocate the importance of a personal archive as art historians are obviously

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going to be more inclined to work on artists where there is a large cache of accessible material. To this end, the donation of the archive to an important collection will ensure the preservation. By making arrangements for management of the estate the artist can take necessary precaution to ensure that their work is presented in an appropriate way after their death. Lang and Lang give the example of cancellation of etching plates to avoid reprints of a poor quality but in the case of ephemeral works this could be instructions relating to reconstruction. Artist would be insuring that the work was only reconstructed under certain circumstance to preserve quality and thus the protecting the artist’s reputation. This is also an issue addressed by Jon Ippolito, who suggests that the licensing of reconstruction, the imprimatur of the artist, has been hitherto not a power the museum possessed but that the museum must take on this responsibility in parallel with the obligation to make information about reconstruction freely available. Frequently an artist reputation is guarded by others with a stake, either emotional or financial, in the reputation to ensure its continuance after the artist’s death, for example family, critics, collectors etc.

While Lang and Lang’s study is of general interest to anyone wishing to secure their reputation and renown in the artworld it is not directly relevant to the subject under discussion. The aspect of their study that is significant is the requirement for a large body of exhibitable world to ensure the future success, particularly after the artist’s death. Given this requirement artists are under pressure to produce work that will survive for a retrospective and their work. Obviously, there are artists who have successful careers despite the lack of a permanent body of work, for example, Hayley Newman’s output has involved not producing artworks as such but fake documentation of performances, Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy’s land art is rarely seem other than in record, Christo and Jeanne Claude have made a very small body of work if one is simply to look at number. However all these artists compensate for the lack of collectable artworks by producing documentation which itself becomes collectable. To an extent they have reversed the traditional order of art production. The artworks have become ephemeral but the ephemera of the art world – catalogues, posters etc and sketches have become the permanent documents.

44 An interesting example of the value of a personal archive can be seen in relation to the donation of the Helen Chadwick’s archive by her estate to the Henry Moore Foundation.
At the conference it was suggested that artist make different decisions at different stage in the lives and careers. While they might be willing to make ephemeral work when young, when the prospect of retrospectives looms large the possibility of not having a body of work can focus the mind on durability. In the interview, broadcast on Channel 4, prior to the announcement of the winner for the Turner Prize, Tracey Emin, speaking about the work of Anya Gallaccio suggested that her lack of profile in comparison to the other nominees was due in part to the ephemeral nature of her work. She also said that now that Gallaccio was producing more durable work and therefore more work that was collectable that she would finally catch up with the others of her generation who had achieved a greater level of renown.

The inherent vice in the definition I have developed refers to an intrinsic element of an ephemeral communicative act. However, while the making of ephemeral art may be a relatively straightforward decision on the part of an individual artist, once the work is in the public domain, and more particularly collected by a public institution, the decisions in relation to the work become significantly more complicated. The work not only incorporates the original inherent vice intended by its maker but it acquires a further vulnerability. This vulnerability refers to the fact that its very ephemerality may be at risk from a profession that views conservation as the default position. In recent years there has been significant developments in the treatment of contemporary artworks, as the number of conferences that refers to this subject suggests.

However, because of the difficulty of identifying ephemeral works and the ambiguous legal status of a conceptual element as opposed to its physical properties, there is still considerable thinking required in this area. There is also the added risk that artists who make ephemeral work my find that their career opportunities and development may be hampered by this fact. this suggest that artist may have other concerns in the making of ephemeral art than career advancement and ensuring their own immortality and the rejection of the myth of immortality may be the very concept that these works embody. These other concerns with be dealt with in greater detail in part 2 of this thesis when I explore why an artist might embark on this risky strategy.
Directive Intent

"ars longa vita brevis"?

In May 2006 I visited the National Gallery of Canada to see the work *Time and Mrs Tiber* (1976) by Canadian artist Liz Magor, and to study the related curatorial and conservation documentation. In my initial conversation with the conservator responsible for the work, he suggested that contrary to the general perception, he did not consider it to be ephemeral. Rather than being a wasted trip this proved to be a significant example of the difficulty of producing, maintaining, and even the identification of Ephemeral Art. In an attempt to unravel the difficulty of identification in relation to Ephemeral Art, I have endeavoured to separate the aspects that make up an ephemeral work in the preceding chapters. In this chapter, however, I will return to the elements of time, communicative act, and inherent vice and discuss these in relation to ‘directive intent’ through the work *Time and Mrs Tiber*.

To begin, I will outline the difference between directive intent and the artist’s intentions. A detailed chronology of the life of *Time and Mrs Tiber* provides an opportunity to explore various aspects of the shifting relationship between an artist and their work. These include: the impact the purchase of a work can have on that relationship, the philosophical issues raised by the demise of a work of art; and finally the possibility that the ‘value’ of a work does not reside in the physical object but can extend far beyond its physical existence. The documentation relating to this work contains
considerable technical information concerning conservation treatment. I will keep this information to a minimum. While it is of interest, it does not relate to my concern with this piece.

In the discussion of intentions in relation to an artwork, the focus is generally on the artist’s intention. However, there are in fact many, possibly conflicting, intentions that could be taken into account, some of which I will address in this chapter. It is one issue where ‘position’ in relation to the artwork is significant in determining which decisions one is likely to make. Aside for the legal rights of artists and collectors, which were dealt with in the previous chapter, there are ethical and epistemological considerations involved in this decision process. When we speak about art, we are not disinterested parties but speak from one or several positions in relation to the artwork. Within the artworld, the producers of the artwork form just one extremely thin layer, in a complex system that includes a large number of specialists who exist alongside the artist in the presentation of the work to an eventual audience. They include agents, dealers, critics, historians, theorists, lecturers, administrators, technicians, librarians, conservators, curators, education specialists, archivists, publishers, editors, to name just a few. Each of these specialists may have their own agenda whether it is conscious or unconscious. The position they adopt will depend on whose interests they serve; the artwork, the artist, the future, the past, the elite, the uninitiated, or self-interest etc. The fact that these intentions may not be conscious are particularly interesting in relation to the works I am discussing. This highlights the possible confusion of intentions that can exist within the decision making process and how the subtle social pressures, the ‘habitus’ as described by Bourdie, can influence this process. If an artist makes an ephemeral griefwork while in mourning, and the intense feelings fade, it is not surprising that the artist’s relationship to that work will change. This may well be true of all works that are produced in response to a particular moment in time; when those circumstances pass the motivation that produced that response will also have passed. In general, this does not significantly affect works, as artists are not frequently called upon to make decisions about works that are fixed but is relevant when the works are subject to change. The artist may well be ambivalent about a work produced at a time of sorrow when those feeling have passed.

This issue is of general relevance in the discussion of any artwork, however, it has particular importance when the structural integrity of an artwork is in flux or may appear to be random or undefined. Ephemeral works are not fixed and their life span may not have be know at the time the

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1 A very interesting example of art being used in the service of intentions that conflict with the original intentions of the artist is discussed Sarah Worth in her article “The Ethics of Exhibitions: On the Presentation of Religious Art.” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 62 no 3 Summer 2004 Worth discusses the questionable ethics of the Bob Jones University Museum which claim to hold the “largest collection of religious art in the Western Hemisphere.” The gallery uses the collection to promote it is own religious view of Catholic imagery as a misrepresentation of the image of Christ and as evidence of Catholic idolatry.
works are made. These works may incorporate an element of chance, which results in the artist being consulted about the work at various stages in the process of disappearance. Traditional artworks are subject to deterioration over time, just as ephemeral works are, however, it is accepted practice that every attempt is made to halt that deterioration, or to simply ignore it and view the work as either a faded relic of itself or romanticise and aestheticize the deterioration. e.g. cracked canvases are not viewed as damaged goods, objects are deliberately ‘distressed’ to make them appear old and the ‘gaudiness’ of restored paintings often shocks. The aging of artworks is accommodated, enabling the continuation of the myth of the immortality of art.

This research focuses on works where we are given information alongside the artwork that gives an insight into the artist’s desires in relation to the work. Rather than speculate on possible intentions, it is these expressed desires, which I term ‘directive intent’, that I will focus on. Artists frequently do not simply produce works of art they also make statements, provide interviews, write books, produce an entire body of theory of which the works may be merely an element. Sherri Irvin also addresses this issue in her article – ‘The Artist’s Sanction in contemporary Art’. Irvin defines sanction as; the object itself, the title, artist’s statements, and instructions to curators regarding conservation of the work and conditions of display. These are expressions of the artist’s intentions but are not identical to them. This information is not an optional extra available only to those with specialist interest in the work but is necessary for an understanding of the work. This does not suggest that the artist fixes the interpretation of the work but the sanction establishes features of the work. Irvin also argues that an artist does not establish features merely by intention. She gives two examples of failed intentions, the first a failure of skill or materials and the second a failure of communication when an artist does not give clear instruction to a curator which cannot be taken into account when viewing a work. In both examples, what the artist has actually sanctioned is in conflict with her intentions. If we focus on sanctions, we are not distracted by unsuccessful intentions.

Irvin argues very convincingly that a consideration of artist’s sanctions is just as relevant to the interpretation of historical works of art as it is to contemporary work and that these should not be treated as a special case. While I would argue that there are considerations specific to contemporary works of art that may not be relevant to historical works, I would agree that we have become so used to a mode of looking at historical works that we do not even realise that we are in fact applying information sanctioned by the artist, or that we have long ago dismissed these sanctions. An obvious

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example of this is in relation to historical site specific work or devotional work. This is also interesting in relation to the argument that contemporary art requires a greater effort at understanding to appreciate the work. However, there are numerous historical examples where an uninitiated viewer would have great difficulty understanding the work before them.

In relation to contemporary art, there are some considerations that did not affect artists of earlier periods, or are only significant while the artist or their representatives are still alive. In the twentieth century, there was a shift in the relationship between the artists and their work, and the relationship between meaning and materials. Artists no longer as a rule use a general set of symbols and imagery that would be recognisable to a literate audience, rather individuals develop a personal language that requires explanation if one wishes to access the work at various levels.

All of this discussion is significant because the works that are the focus of this enquiry were originally made to be ephemeral but all passed through a phase when those intentions were questioned and the intentions themselves were in flux. Both Zoe Leonard and Liz Magor collaborated with conservators for a period, as a consequence of their works becoming the property of an institution. This may appear to contradict the ephemeral nature of the works. In the case of my work, In Memory, I wished a section of the work, a strip of silk 17 x 100cm, to be placed “in a heap” on the floor, which the viewer could pick up and read. The silk had printed text that was unfixed and so the act of moving the silk though ones hands would eventually erase the work. The gallery were concerned that the piece would become ‘damaged’ and grubby, and so hung the silk alongside the main section of the work. This was not a desire to subvert my intentions, but highlights the differing concepts of ‘damage’. This also highlights the difficulty of violating the requirement for permanence and the conflicting intentions that can exist in the process of exhibiting a work. When the ephemerality of a work made in response to mourning is questioned, it also raise the possibility that the intentions may be ephemeral and as the mourning fades so also may the new found interest in the transient. With the fading of mourning the artist may well return to the world that requires permanence.

Returning to my definition of Ephemeral Art for a moment; I have already discussed the relationship between the ephemeral communicative act and time and the active nature of time as opposed to merely existing in time. I would now like to explore another consequence of that active time and discuss it in relation to ‘directive intent’. Micheline Sauvage discusses the vagueness of the terminology of time in her 1953 essay ‘Notes on the Superposition of Temporal Modes in the Works

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3 This is particular interesting in relation to religious art being shown in secular settings and the respectful treatment and behaviour that would have been required by these works when they were first produced.
In order to facilitate a clear discussion of time in relation to works of art Sauvage developed a framework that outlines the different facets of time that may exist in a given piece. Briefly, this involves distinguishing between four different temporal elements -

T1 - the time it takes the artists to produce the piece also the time of the work's history, who owns it and what happened to the actual piece. Ordinary lived time, Sauvage suggests it would be “rash” to call it real time. This is the aspect of time I wish to discuss in this chapter.

T2 - the time it takes to read the work. In a book or a television programme, this is straightforward - the duration of the programme etc. In a work of art there is also the time required to read and to understand the piece. It is the time the work requires. This is the time already discussed in chapter one and is related to a quality of attention.

T3 - the time of what is represented by the piece. A film might span 10 years and one might feel one has lived through a great span of time in one evening. In a narrative painting this time might be the span of time shown e.g. a person depicted at different stages of their life. This is a self-contained time.

T4 - the time represented, the era e.g. in a mythical painting it is mythical time or an historical period. T3 and T4 will be discussed in relation to specific works in the second half of this dissertation.

The relationship between T1 and ephemeral art is particularly significant as this aspect of time covers the entire existence of the piece during which it may be constantly changing. Once an ephemeral art piece ceases to exist, its T1 existence is only in the memory of those who have viewed it or in documentation. The T1 also incorporate a time when a work is no longer exhibitable because the decay has progressed to the point when it may no longer have particular qualities that the artist wished the work to exhibit or that are necessary to meaning. This is not exclusively a concern for ephemeral art but also relates to the accidentally ephemeral. This is well illustrated by the discussion surrounding the work of Eva Hesse and Joseph Beuys.

Phillip Rawson, in his Lecture ‘Time in Art’

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5 The case of Joseph Beuys' Felt Suit 1970 is a very interesting example of the shift in intentions that can take place on the death of an artist. An artist's representative may well have very different desire in relation to a work or the artist's legacy than the artist themselves may have had. Because the suit was declared a "particularly vulnerable item" the Tate consulted Beuys about its maintenance. Beuys responded "I don't give a damn. You can nail it to the wall. You can also hang it on a hanger, ad libitum! But you can also wear it or throw it into a chest." The artist Jana Sterbak proposed using the suit in her installation and after much consultation the Tate contacted Joseph Beuys' widow Eva Beuys, who stated "[The suit] must sadly never be shown again in any location, on any occasion and in any context, however constituted, including for the purpose of study." This case is referred to in Bracker, A. and Barker, R. "Relic or release: defining and documenting the physical aesthetic death of contemporary works of art."
discusses the different in attitude to TI in Eastern and Western tradition. The evidence of the history of an object in Eastern Tradition is incorporated into the piece, e.g. successive owners of a piece of calligraphy would add their seal to the work, documenting its journey through time. Equally, if a piece of porcelain is broken, the break would become part of the work, and no attempt would be made to hide the repair, in fact it would be highlighted using gold. In western tradition, the history of a piece is significant in that the owners of the piece are part of its provenance. However, art institutions and collectors attempt to keep works of art in their original condition. I suggest that the TI of the work may well extend beyond the lifetime of the physical object.

Liz Magor was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1948. She attended the University of British Columbia from 1966 to 1968. She then moved on to the Parsons School of Design in New York City, studying there from 1968 to 1970, before finishing her formal training at the Vancouver School of Art in 1971. In her early work, she used non-traditional and organic materials to explore ideas relating to creation and destruction emphasizing the process of change. In 1982 Magor represented Canada at the Biennale of Sydney, The Venice Biennale in 1984, and Documenta VIII in Kassel in 1987. In 2001, she was awarded the prestigious Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts.

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Liz Magor *Time and Mrs Tiber* (1976)

*Time and Mrs. Tiber* was an early work produced in 1976 and consisted of 53 jars of preserves, some of which were found on an abandoned farm on Cortes Island, a remote and inaccessible spot in British Columbia. The artist prepared 27 jars in 1977, the remainder were the original preserves found on Cortes Island and date from the 1950s. The farm had been the home of homesteaders Mr. and Mrs. Tiber. The jars along with the others made by Magor were displayed on open wooden shelves with other kitchen items, recipe cards and utensils. The piece also included excerpts from *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, which referred to mortality and the passage of time. On one recipe card with the heading “DATE BREAD” the following excerpt appears.
"Dissolution, putrefaction," said Hans Castorp. "They are the same thing as combustion: combination with oxygen – am I right?"

"To a T. Oxidization." And life?

"Oxidization too. The same. Yes young man, life too is principally oxidization of the cellular albumen, which gives us that beautiful animal warmth, of which we sometimes have more than we need. Tut, living consists in dying, no use mincing the matter – une destruction organique, as some Frenchman with his native levity has called it. It smells like that, too. If we don't think our judgment is corrupted."

*The Magic Mountain* is considered Mann's most overtly philosophical work. The novel is set in a sanatorium where a young man Hans Castrop has gone to recuperate. Initially intending to spend only a short time, he eventually remains for seven years. His companions in the Sanatorium are Settembrini, Naptha, Krowsk-i, Clavdia Chauchat, and Joachim. An Italian liberal, a Jesuit intellectual, a doctor, a Russian women and Castrop’s cousin respectively.

*Time and Mrs. Tiber* was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in 1977. At the time of its purchase Mayo Graham, Assistant Curator at the NGC, expressed concerns about the stability of the work. These concerns were twofold; there were concerns about the stability of the contents of the jars and the possibility that the various small objects in the piece could easily be stolen. Immediate action was taken to secure the object with wax and a report was requested from Mary-Lou Florian, of Conservation Processes Research.7 In June 1977, Mary-Lou Florian reported that Jars no 6 and 16 show build up of gas that could “cause the tops to pop”. She considered that an explosion was unlikely, as this would only occur when there is a build up of active CO2 formation from fermentation. She suggested that the liquid in the jars should be replaced with 70% ethyl alcohol and the tops sealed with PARAFILM. Specifically the metal snap lid and crew rim on jar no 16 should be replaced and tightened and the snap lid on jar no 6 should be adhered to PARAFILM by warm wax. These jars were the original preserves made by Mrs Tiber, in connection with the jars added by Liz Magor it was suggested that these should be replaced or re-preserved. The condition report summarised concluded “The “Work” in its present state is in a state of normal active deterioration.”8 Magor was kept informed of the alteration to her work and consented to these interventions.

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7 Mary-Lou Florian was the conservation scientist at the Conservation Processes Research Section at the Canadian Conservation Institute.

8 Deterioration analysis and treatment for “Time and Mrs. Tiber” (1976) by Liz Magor. Correspondence between Mary-Lou Florian and Mayo Graham.
In a 1976 interview Liz Magor discussed her interest in nature, specifically birds and how they are rarely seen but more frequently studied through their ‘remains’. She stated . . .

what remains is their leftovers—their nests, their feathers, and all the little paths they made in bushes, as well as their bodies and skeletons. If I were going to, say, study eagles, I would end up looking for his victims under a tree. I wouldn’t see the eagle, but I would see the remains of what he had consumed, the evidence of his activity and life. ⁹

Magor also discussed her interest in reclusive people and her admiration for their self-sufficiency. These two interests, in the recluse and the remains of an existence, come together in *Time and Mrs Tiber*:

They were self-sufficient, and now they are dead. In her house I found a shelf full of preserves that Mrs Tiber had put up. She was working against time. She was trying to keep the fruit preserved for next year. The preserved fruit remains, but she and her husband are dead. ¹⁰

The work continued to change, (or deteriorate), and was inspected regularly. In 1979, Magor became concerned about the state of the work and contacted the NGC asking them to reopen the discussion of the work.

. . . about ‘Time and Mrs Tiber’. I’m worried about it drying out. . . I’m thinking that the liquid in the jars might be leaving a little faster than I intended. I talked to the conservation people when the piece first went there and pretty much told them to leave it alone, but I think I’d like to reopen the case. I know they’ll be drying out to a certain extent, but I wanted it to happen very slowly, the way it was when I first found them.

Barbara W Keyser wrote to Liz Magor and suggested adding vinegar and 1% benzoic acid to the jars and replacing some of the lids. ¹¹ Keyser expressed her desire to maintain the ‘food’ status of the work and did extensive research into the preserving and canning process. ¹² Magor in response to Keyser’s letter stated

I have recently become concerned that the piece may be changing a little faster than I had anticipated. I always realized that the piece would continue to deteriorate and I consider the change an integral part of the piece. However, I though of it’s lifespan as being comparable to my own, that is I wouldn’t want it to become a brown mush over the next ten years but rather over the next fifty. ¹³

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⁹ Excerpts from a taped interview with Liz Magor, December 1976, in Liz Magor File NGC.
¹⁰ ibid
¹¹ Barbara Keyser was the conservator at the NGC.
¹² Keyser gives a summary of the canning and preserving process in her paper “Time and Mrs. Tiber and Food Technology”.
¹³ Correspondence between Liz Magor and Barbara W Keyser 2/10/1979 NGC archive.
In response to the suggestion that the lids be replaced, she states, “I cringe at the thought of those new looking lids. It’s impossible to duplicate the age.”

In 1980, an extensive report on the work was prepared by Keyser who concluded that there were several aspects of the work that should be prioritised in any discussion of conservation. She recommended a “soft technology” approach, that is, the use of tradition preserving techniques to maintain the “food” quality of the work. This would ensure the potential ‘edibility’ of the work, which could differ from concerns related to the aesthetic quality of the piece. She also emphasised the artist’s desire that the work should ‘live’ for approximately 50 years. Her final recommendation was that like preserves the work should be stored in a dark, cool place and should not be considered for loan or travel.

In 1986, the case of Time and Mrs Tiber was again reopened and the possibility of deaccessioning the work was first mentioned. In February and March of that year Marion Barclay, senior conservator at the NGC, contacted Alan McNairn at the New Brunswick Museum, and spoke to Stephen Hackney, Tate Galley, as she wished to consult on the possibility of developing a policy for deaccessioning contemporary works of art for conservation reasons. These conversations showed that there was a precedent for deaccessioning but that it was extremely rare. The example from the Tate was particularly interesting as it is the first mention of the possibility of a category shift to accommodate works that may be no longer fit for public exhibition but may still have ‘value’. The Tate deaccessioned several painting from its permanent collection that had been damaged by flooding of the Thames. These painting were “put into a new category, more archival”. Barclay report a conversation with Ron Martin, in which he expressed his concerns about the potential dangers of deaccessioning and suggested that replication of the work should be considered, but agreed that the ‘archival study collection’ was an interesting solution. Barclay concludes her report with a plea for ‘clemency’. She states “... deaccessioning is not a subject which should be treated lightly. There is a responsibility to future generations to have a chance to view objects from today, even if they are in a somewhat ‘failed’ state.”

Alan McNarin, in his response outline some of the issues involve in deaccessioning. “The museum will not acquire materials with the definite intention of eventual deaccession.” He also raised the issue of ‘usufruct’. This is the legal right to use and enjoy the advantages or profits of another’s property. He states

14 ibid
15 Marion Barclay, Travel Report: Toronto 20-22 March 1987
16 Alan McNarin The New Brunswick Museum 13 Feb 1987 responding to Marion Barclay
The problem seems to be exactly what one buys from the artists. If one buys usufruct only, then of course it follows that a work cannot be deaccessioned or destroyed without the consent of the artist. It is my understanding that with respect to contemporary fine art one buys a restricted usufruct which probably does not permit destruction or disposal without permission of the creator.\(^{18}\)

McNairn outlined the various circumstances under which a work could be deaccessioned. These were: accidental loss or destruction, intentional discard, sale, trade or exchange, gift or repatriation.

In April Marion Barclay wrote to Jessica Bradley and discussed Magor’s thoughts about the work at that stage.

Liz says that this piece should be allowed to deteriorate at its own rate and when it gets to the point when it is no longer exhibitable, it should, to quote Liz “be thrown in the garbage”.

According to Liz this is better than artificially maintaining the work. In other words it should be left to self-destruct.\(^{19}\)

Barclay expressed her concern but begins to prepare for what appears to be the inevitable fate of the piece.

As this may involve the first time ever de-accessioning of a contemporary work of art in the NGC collection, I suggest the written and photographic documentation be checked and if not sufficient, up-graded.

However in a letter from Liz Magor to Marion Barclay May 22 1986, Magor changes her mind about throwing the work away – “I think I was hasty in saying the piece should be thrown out. There’s more to the work than the jars. I’d like to keep the piece extant a decade or two longer.”\(^{20}\)

Magor discusses the aesthetic quality of the decay and the decision regarding which decay was acceptable and which was not; this she said was an aesthetic decision. Magor visited the work and agreed to replace some of the fruit herself rather than rendering the work ‘unexhibitable’. The documentation at this stage suggests that the possibility disposal of the work is reluctantly being accepted by the experts involved. There is a handwritten note dated 3 July 1986 stating, “if the work is to be “ditched” it will need to be done in consultation with a safety inspector”.

The letters at this stage are tinged with an air of sadness and the conflicting emotions involved in the demise of the work are evident. Magor is pulled between conflicting desires to acknowledge the ephemerality of the work and the desire to maintain the piece. Magor's relationship

\(^{18}\) Alan McNarin
\(^{19}\) Marion Barclay to Jessica Bradley 1986 April 23. Jessica Bradley was the Curator of Contemporary Art at the NGC.
\(^{20}\) Correspondence between Liz Magor and Marion Barclay NGC archive
with the piece is constantly reinforced with numerous references to the work living as long as she did.

On July 18 1986, a further report from the Microbiology Research Division is presented which highlights the health risk from the work. Mr. Erdman Health Protection Branch, Health and Welfare visited the work and Marion Barclay report—“Mr Erdman’s immediate reaction was that we “ditch the lot.”21 This report detailed the health risk from the work, mainly that several of the jars contained bacterium C. botulinum. This toxin presented a serious risk to the staff at the gallery as a small amount would be fatal. This was not a potential risk but a serious and immediate danger, as many of the jars would contain stress fractures as a result of the heating required in the preserving process. C. botulinum can cause death either through ingestion or through inhalation. This new development meant that there were now other considerations. Liz Magor and Mrs Tiber’s efforts on Cortes Island to preserve the fruits of summer now presented a serious health risk.

In March 1987, Marion Barclay again reviews the situation in a letter to J M MacGregor Grant, in which she discusses Magor response to the possibility of replication.

Magor does not think the idea of replication (of her work), without her involvement in the process, is valid. . . . If she is not able to be directly involved with the maintenance of her work then in her mind the deterioration becomes part of the evolving of that work, part of its history.

Re unexhibitable state Magor said “deaccessioning is to think in terms of capital punishment for the artist and the work, she thought it was too severe an answer and mentioned that decisions made today will not reflect the condition in the years in the future.”22

In January 1988, Magor writes “[I will] enlisted help of expert in Domestic Science. I think these ones will last.”23

It was agreed between all parties that the jars that posed a health risk should be disposed of. Magor visited the gallery to examine the jars before the disposal took place. Magor agreed that several of the jars had deteriorated beyond an acceptable point. Marion Barclay and Richard Gagnier, in their paper “Is Time Up for Time and Mrs Tiber? states -

For her, three jars that contained mangoes which she had prepared were no longer acceptable: they had deteriorated beyond “the implication of a passage of time,” and were literally “gone”. For Magor – it must be emphasized again – changes produced by decay were a

21 Marion Barclay To Jessica Bradley July 24 1986
22 JM Macgregor Grant was the Chief of Restoration at the Conservation Laboratory at NGC.
23 Letter from Liz Magor to “Diana”
necessary and desirable part of the work. But the preserves no longer satisfied her: the forms had disintegrated, with no compensatory colour changes.24

*Time and Mrs Tiber* now sits dismantled in the stores of the National Gallery of Canada. It no longer exhibits the qualities that the jars of fruit had when Liz Magor first came upon them on the remote Cortes Island 80 miles northwest of Vancouver, four days by sailboat. This was the work of a young artist, just six years out of art school. Her youth at the time of making the work does not suggest that this is not a thoughtful work, clearly conceptualised and articulated. It does show however how our relationship with time can change over our lifetime and that an artist whose works deal with time, may well have a changing relationship with their work as they age. These shifting relationship do not reflect muddled thinking or a conceptual flaw in the work, rather growth and development of ideas that are themselves about something shifting and dynamic.

Mrs Tiber had picked the fruit and preserved it to defy time, she wanted to keep it from this summer to next summer, so, in her small way she was very effectively defying time. . .

I don’t look at Mrs Tiber as a nostalgic piece . . . I think that what I really feel strongly is the passage of time and that there’s just no way to deal with it . . . you’re just helpless. . .

I wanted the piece to look very quiet as though .. partially I think they (the jars) survived because they were quiet . . they didn’t draw attention to themselves, they very quietly sat there in suspension.25

In this work we are presented by two sets of ‘directive intent’. Mrs Tiber clearly communicates her wish that the fruits of summer should survive to be eaten in the dark cold days of winter, when luscious golden fruits could be the difference between life and death. This act, as Magor identified, is a desire to defy time. It is also an act of hopefulness and promise, that one will survive another year. These present jars of sinister black liquid and greenish lumps are more reminiscent of something from the dark depths than anything that ripened in the summer sun and they no longer offer the possibility of nourishment. This does not means that Mrs. Tiber has failed but shows what Magor describes as our helplessness in the face of the destruction of time. Magor, by removing the jars from Cortes Island created a monument to the industry of Mrs Tiber and her skill, which has proved one of the ephemeral aspects of this work. Mrs Tiber’s fruits survived more successfully that either any made by Magor or the conservators who attempted to replicate the process.

Magor also refers to the quietness of the jars, which had survived by not drawing attention to themselves. However, by bringing them to the gallery, Magor drew attention to them and they lost

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25 Transcript of interview 17/5/1977 op cit

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their immortality. Like a mythical hero, whose immortality rests on staying in one place, but risks leaving as a form of sacrifice and becomes human and frail. Leaving a safe but confined environment is also the fate of Joachim in *The Magic Mountain*, his curiosity about the wider world induced him to leave the sanatorium only to return after a short time to die. The dilapidated house on Cortes Island had proved to be the perfect environment for storing preserves. This was a cool and dark place, which contrasted sharply with the environment of the gallery. The rapid deterioration was unwittingly caused by the very environment that we associate with conservation and preservation the gallery. Some of the early interventions undertaken with the intention of preservation had the direct opposite effect. On a recipe card entitled *Fruited Lemon Pudding* Magor hints at the desire to hermetically seal an object quoting again from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* -

A: Have got the Absolute. I mean the air-tight glasses full of jam, fruit, or meat, which Hans Castrop suddenly remembers as Naphta, his gravest educator on Magic Mountain, instructs him in the Hermetic Philosophy. Hermetic – what a lovely word, Herr Naphta!

On another card Magor writes

And Hans says “Hermetics, hermetics! I really love that word, it reminds me of my grandmother’s jams and jellies. I used to walk into the pantry and see all these beautiful jams and jellies and I thought, there they are, all sealed away, locked up forever, not changing,”

Throughout the correspondence Magor’s sense of responsibility for the jars is evident both stated and in the tone. Equality, the mimetic quality of this work, Magor sense of identification represents a Wildean relationship between the artist and the work. *Time and Mrs Tiber* is a form of portrait in the attic, but rather than deterioration while the artist remains youthful, Magor refers several times to her desire that the work should last as long as she did, thus this work acts as a mirror in which Magor had hoped to see her own aging process reflected. Under these circumstances, the rapid decay of the preserves threatens this relationship.

In a review of Magor’s work published in “Artmagazine” in 1977, Ann Rosenberg states - “Liz’s art poses philosophical questions and offers some intelligent answers.” Time and Mrs Tiber may no longer possess the visual qualities it once had, however, this does not mean that it now mute and no longer asks philosophical questions. The young Magor offered a specific ‘directive intent’ which she communicated in conversations, correspondence and interviews. The correspondence from the older Magor demonstrates that nothing is fixed, that for some being older may well mean being wiser. *Time and Mrs Tiber* may no longer possess the visual qualities it once had but I would suggest

26 At one stage the jars were refrigerated which caused condensation to build up on the lids and the jars that caused rust.
that it is older and wiser and it still asks philosophical questions and still provides intelligent answers. These answers may not be as fixed and sure as they were in 1977 but their very uncertainty may be the wisdom they offer. In response to the question posed by Richard Gagnier – Is time up for Time and Mrs Tiber? I answer a resounding no. There is still the original knowledge of time and our efforts to defy it, and there is also new knowledge. This knowledge resides both in the work, which embodies our inability to defy time, and in the documentation in the NGC. This documentation gives us an insight into the development of thinking, both about this work and the broader philosophical issues concerning deaccessioning. The documentation also shows how the relationship between the artist, conservator, and curators can be an enriching and thought-provoking, one in which all parties develop for the benefit of the work. It shows the ephemerality of intentions and the effort involved in letting go of both ideals and a work of art.
Mourning Durability

\[ \text{\ldots\ losing is an art; it requires a new quality of attention.} \]

The answer to the question ‘Is there a relationship between ephemeral art and awareness of our mortality?’ is simple - yes, ephemeral art is a reminder of the fragility of existence. However, the simplicity of the answer can act as a defence against thinking, it is not an end to the discussion, but the beginning. With the tenacity of a three year old who responds to every reply with ‘why?’ I wish to pursue this thought and attempt to untangle that apparently simple answer. John Dewey makes a very important distinction between perception and recognition, he describes recognition as – falling back on “some previously formed interpretive schema” or stereotype when confronted with an object, and perception as involving active receptivity to an object so that its qualities may modify previously formed habits or schemes.\(^2\) It is in the distinction between these two activities that experience of ephemeral art becomes meaningful. In ephemeral art, we \textit{recognise} that there is a relationship between it and mortality. However, what are the implications of \textit{perceiving} this fact? In the exploration of time and the communicative act in this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Phillips, A. \textit{Darwin's Worms}, London: Faber & Faber, 1999 p 120}
  \item \textit{Dewey, J. \textit{Art as Experience}, New York: Perigee Books, 1980 p 52}
\end{itemize}
thesis, it was clear that the quality of attention was significant when experiencing ephemeral art and it is through this quality of attention that we perceive this relationship.\(^3\)

Ephemerality in art is generally read either as a political gesture or as a form of Memento Mori in the tradition of Vanitas paintings. However the works that are the focus of this research, are not reminders of our own death, which is in fact unknowable for we cannot know non existence, but a reminder of something we can know and we know to be painful, these works are reminders that those we love will die.\(^4\) This distinction between awareness of our own mortaly and the experience of mourning the loss of another is significant to an understanding of Ephemeral Art. When we contemplate the vast unknowable that is our own death we attempt to transcend it, to create permanent structure. However, when we make artworks that respond to the death of those we love then permanent structures are often inappropriate in the face of the knowledge of transience. In these circumstances, we attempt to find a value in transience through an engagement with objects and art that are themselves fleeting.

Death (more exactly, knowledge of mortality) is not the root of everything there is in culture; after all, culture is precisely about transcendance, about going beyond what is given and found before the creative imagination of culture set to work; culture is after that permanence and durability which life, by itself, so sorely misses. But death (more exactly, awareness of mortality) is the ultimate condition of cultural creativity as such. It makes permanence into a task, into an urgent task, into a paramount task – a fount and a measure of all tasks – and so it makes culture, that huge and never stopping factory of permanence.\(^5\)

If our culture is predicated on the desire for permanence, ephemerality then is flawed in its lack of permanence and this results in a negative view of ephemerality. Ephemeral Artworks not only possess a physical inherent vice in the form of materials and interaction but they also contain a conceptual vulnerability. The knowledge they offer may in fact be so difficult to perceive that they run the risk of being ignored or dismissed as merely reminder of our mortality and forestall any deeper engagement. In this chapter, I will discuss what might appear to be the opposite of my subject - our attachment to permanence, and its function not only in art, but also in Western

\(^3\) The shift between recognition and perception is reminiscent of Bergson's discussion of intuition already discussed in the preface. In my investigation of ephemerality I have returned again and again to forms of knowing and the chasm that can exit between knowing and understanding.

\(^4\) Zygmunt Bauman addresses the unknowability of our own death drawing on the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Freud, Schopenhauer, Morin, and Decartes, he states "Death is . . . precisely the unthinkable: a state without thought: one we cannot visualize – even construe conceptually." Bauman, Z. Mortality Immortality & Other Life Strategies, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992 p 14

\(^5\) ibid, p 4
culture generally, through theories that illuminate the deep-rooted nature of this attachment. Through this discussion of the relationship between permanence and mortality I will demonstrate that the experience of mourning can result in a significantly different form of mythmaking that is embodied in Ephemeral Art.

As was highlighted in the discussion of the communicative act, the requirement for permanence is not universal, but a cultural phenomenon. European culture overwhelmingly requires visual art to be durable and collectable. At a temporal level art serves to represent the present in the future - a form of cultural propaganda, a monument to ourselves, and economically, durability is a requirement of any investment commodity. However, underlying this is a greater emotional need for our cultural object to survive intact – we need to know that some things will always be safe, will always be ‘sacred’, and through which some part of ourselves will survive. The ephemeral would not be noteworthy or remarkable were it not for the enormous importance we attach to permanence powerfully expressed through art objects and their durability. Durability will be examined from three perspectives – the economic requirement, the psychological need and finally the cultural demand.

While it may once have seemed an exaggeration of economic determinism to regard works of art as ‘merely’ commodities in an economic exchange, it is now pretty plain that our entire lives have become so extensively constituted in these terms that we cannot any longer pretend otherwise.6

Products which are considered ‘works of art’ have been singled out as culturally significant objects by those who at any given time and social stratum wield the power to confer the predicate ‘work of art’ unto them; they cannot elevate themselves from the host of man-made objects simply on the basis of some inherent qualities.7

The established order insists that its art must come in the form of objects and that these objects should be durable and possessable.8


From these statements, we can deduce three important ideas. Firstly, the art institution holds the power to categorize objects as works of art and secondly, it would be naïve to consider the art world as separate from the world of economics and commerce and finally it would be equally foolhardy to ignore the larger cultural significance of durable art.

Durability is a key category in Michael Thompson’s theory of production and consumption, which he applied to the art world. Thompson divides the world of objects into three categories, durable, transient and rubbish. The durable, as the word suggests, should have an unlimited life span and should increase in value. Objects in the transient category also have an indefinite life span but are decreasing in value. The third category, rubbish, has a limited life span and has no value. Classification into one category or another may differ between cultures, however, all cultures insist on a distinction between valued and valueless. It is this insistence on a distinction between valued and valueless that is interesting in relation to ephemeral art. According to Thompson’s theory art falls into the durable category. Thompson uses the following to illustrate the cultural categories that enable us to distinguish between art and non-art. This simple system gives rise to four logical possibilities. First, an art object placed in the art category: second, a non-art object placed in a non-art category: third, a non-art object placed in an art category: fourth, an art object placed in a non-art category. To illustrate these categories he uses the example of: one, the Mona Lisa in a museum: two, a hallstand in a hall: three, a hallstand in a gallery and finally 4, the Mona Lisa being used as an ironing board. Examples 1 and 2 are not problematic. Example 3 has become acceptable since Duchamp. However example four would be seen an affront to our ideas of how objects should be treated. Thompson suggests this anomaly technique can be used to examine the cultural boundaries that separate art from non-art.

When an object is ascribed a category its categorisation will determine how the object is treated. If an object is in the durable category, as an artwork would be, we do not expose it to risk, we care for it and maintain it. This is what Thompson describes as “worldview prior to action”. The converse can also be true. That is “action is prior to worldview”. Marcel Duchamp described a urinal as a work of art; therefore, it has durable status and is treated accordingly. This illustrates that objects are not categorised because of intrinsic physical properties and confirms the statement made by Hans Haacke.

An entire industry exists to ensure that art, which in fact does not have a limitless life span but is very delicate, is preserved in a perfect state. When the best efforts of conservator fail
Thompson gives the example of floods in Venice) the destruction of durable art works is met with shock and outrage. There is a perception that the “culture bearers” have failed in their duty of care for the culture’s durables.

Those with control in a system can influence the categorisation of objects and insure the success or durability of their objects and the failure of objects of others. In the sub-system that is the ‘artworld’, galleries, museums and dealers can exercise this control. Other factors influencing the status of an object are the related scarcity and value. Art dealers can control the supply of art objects and thus control the value. Artists and their peer group can describe their output as art because it is produced in an art context. However, while acknowledging this to be so, the dominant group, the galleries and dealers, are not interested in this classification. What they are interested in is good and bad art - good art /durable/valuable, bad art/transient/rubbish.

Thompson devotes the final section of his theory to works of art that attempt to challenge this system. It must be borne in mind that he is writing in the 1970s and there have been considerable developments in the relationship between art and the market in the intervening years. He identifies art groups or movements that address the art objects as durable and possessable. However, while he considers the aims of some of these groups both interesting and admirable he is very dismissive of their efforts. He describes Auto-destructive Art as; “essentially a millenarian movement dedicated to reversing the position of the class and egalitarian apices of the ‘rubbish triangle’: an engaging if impotent, rubbish cargo cult”9 He saves his greatest disdain for conceptual art. He defines conceptual art as that which attempts to detach art from the art object, and in so doing severs the link between power, status and the art object. The consequence of this is a shift towards the caste apex of the rubbish triangle.

“..conceptualists are simply reacting to their situation on the basis of an inadequate understanding of what that situation is.”10 This situation may no longer be true. Since the 1980s artists are very aware of the relationship between art and commerce and this is no longer the

8 ibid p 123
9 ibid p 125
taboo subject as described by Thompson. Ephemeral Art uses the inherent vice of objects and turns it into its medium and often its subject. It highlights that, in fact, there are no real durables and a change in society or social order can have a dramatic effect on the categorisation of objects. For example, in wartime, art works can lose their durable status and becomes a means of barter for food.

Eleven years after Thompson wrote Rubbish Theory, Robert Hewison, in his book Future Tense, A New Art for the Nineties, takes up this discussion. Hewison examines the state of the relationship between art and commerce after the 1980s, when, rather than being the taboo subject within the art world as described by Thompson, it became a subject for art and in some cases it’s very reason for being. Hewison’s thesis is a gloomy one. “I believe that, as the next century approaches, we have to come to terms with a cultural crisis...” An element of this crisis is the commodification of culture; “Culture becomes... a commodity within the general circulation of commodities that in the end turn the individual self into a commodity among others.” According to Hewison, television is one of the driving forces behind this decline “imagery overrides ideas, and where accessible images... are offered as a substitute for thought.”

Robert Hughes in his lecture “On Art and Money” referring to the art boom of the 1980s discusses the link between art and the financial market.

Never before has the visual arts been the subject of such extreme inflation or fetishisation. The creation of the confidence that it will increase in monetary value is the cultural artefact of the twentieth century.”

Despite Hewison and Hughes’ pessimistic view the art world does not appear to be in crisis any more today than it has always been. Because artistic creation by its nature is producing something new, then to those for whom change is a challenge there will always be an element of crisis in flux, rather the possibility of something exciting and original alongside the possibility of failure.

The ephemeral artworks that are the focus of my study are produced by artists with international reputations whose work is not compromised by this status. These artists also work

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12 ibid. p 14
13 ibid.
14 Hughes, R. “On Art and Money”, Art Monthly, No. 82, 1984/5, p 58
15 Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (For David) was purchased by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, one of Felix Gonzalez Torres’ Candy Spill series, Untitled (Public Opinion) was purchased by the Guggenheim. They did not buy the actual sweets but a license, which allowed them the ‘right of ownership’.
in other economies, i.e. the economy of funding and sponsorship, either through educational institutions in much the same way that Lygia Clark and Alan Kaprow did in the 1960s, or through commissions. This suggests that ephemeral art has become part of the mainstream. Is the absorption of ephemeral art into the main stream of the art world merely evidence of the art world’s practice of absorbing anything that appears to challenge it, or has the artworld come to realise that ephemerality has something to communicate, and, that this outweighs the unconservable nature of the piece. That there is a value regardless of the fact that work will never become part of the permanent collection.

The demand for durability highlighted in Michael Thompson is echoed in the ‘need’ of conservators to preserve artworks even if the creator of the artwork had not intended the work to be preserved but had in fact created it with the explicit intension that it should deteriorate and decay. Another example of the drive to conserve is the reluctance of institutions and nations to return cultural property to legitimate claimants – simply put, holding on to what you have. These examples could has a very simple economic rational at their core, but the drive to conserve, retain and make durable would appear to be driven by a far more basic and instinctual need. While Thompson’s theory explains the mechanism of the category system, if we turn to Freud and post Freudian theorists, we get an idea of why the system exists at all, why there is a devaluing of the transient, an equating of the ephemeral with rubbish and why the lack of permanence is perceived as a flaw.

Freud’s theory of mourning can be divided into two phases – the early theory of mourning is expressed in works “On Transience”(1915), Mourning and Melancholia(1917), and the later in The Ego and the Id(1923). Freud was writing against the background of the First World War and the enormous losses experienced at that time, personal losses, cultural loss, loss of ideals and beliefs. Freud declares it is no wonder that under these circumstances people should cling to what is left to them, but cautions against a devaluing of what has been lost.16

Between these two phases Freud experienced personal bereavement through the death of his daughter Sophie who died of influenza in 1920 and in 1923, he lost his grandson Heinerle (Sophie’s second child) to tuberculosis, which resulted in a re-evaluation of the process of grieving. The reassessment could be evidence of the distinction between Dewey’s two forms of knowing, perceiving and recognition. Freud was clearly moved by the overwhelming losses of the First World War, but at that stage believed the ‘normal’ mourning would eventually come to an end. However, after the death of his beloved daughter and grandson, he realised that mourning might be a life long task and that a complete ‘recovery’ might not be possible.

In his essay ‘On Transience’ Freud describes a conversation he had with a poet friend while out walking. The young poet was unable to enjoy the beauty of the scene surrounding them because of his awareness of the inevitable decay of all natural splendour, in fact the transience of everything, both natural and human creations. Freud states that this despondency is one of two possible reactions to the knowledge of the inevitability of death and decay, the other being a rebellion against the facts – an assertion of or a demand for immortality. Freud accepts the poet’s vision of the world as transient but refutes the poets pessimistic view that transience robs something of its worth. Freud proclaims that rather than devaluing beauty, transience increases its worth. “Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment.”

Freud describes the transient beauty of the natural world and suggests the cyclical processes of life and death, spring and winter, can be seen in relation to our lives as eternal rather than transient. He cites three examples of transience, a blossom, a human face, and a work of art all of which are undiminished by their fugitive nature. He also acknowledges that it is not just the work of art itself that is prone to decay but the meaning of the object is vulnerable to disappearance but says we should be undaunted by this fact.

A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire today will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon earth ceases: but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration.

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17 ibid. p 306
18 ibid.
Freud came to the conclusion that the poet’s aversion to transience was in fact an aversion to mourning. The mind instinctively recoils from anything painful, the awareness of death includes an awareness of painful mourning that will inevitable follow on from the demise of that which is transient. The poet’s despondency protects him from becoming attached to anything or anyone and thus exposing him to the risk, indeed the inevitability of loss. It is not just death itself we wish to avoid thinking about but mourning. Adam Phillips suggests that we need other instincts to allow us not only to mourn, but the larger capacity to mourn the very idea of permanence “which we have represented to ourselves as God, or Truth.” The instinct that Phillips suggests we need to develop are clearly at odds with out cultural conditioning, however, through the experience of Ephemeral Art we have an opportunity to develop these instinct if we are open to the experience they offer.

Mourning is the reaction to the loss of a loved one or an ideal, a belief, for example in truth, or immortality, or one’s home or country. It refers to the painful process of relinquishing emotional ties to the lost person or object through a process of reality testing. This process, involves periods of obsessive remembering, as the mourner seeks to conjure up the lost person and to replace them with an imaginary presence. This magical resurrection allows the mourner to prolong the existence of the lost person, which, is the main object of Trauerarbeit (grief work). By the process of reality testing, the mourner gradually comes to the realisation that the loved one no longer exists. Eventually, according to Freud, the mourner’s libido is released from its attachment to the lost person and is free to attach to a new person or object. This is a very difficult and painful process made more difficult by the fact that when we mourn the loss of another we are mourning the loss of part of the self. This understanding of the reaction to the loss of another or object requires an understanding of the part the other person or object plays in the forming of a sense of self. For this understanding we must look to Freud’s earlier work “On Narcissism: An Introduction” In this theory Freud traces the ego’s development from primary narcissism – ‘ego-libido’, the instinct of self-preservation that every creature possesses, which is developed in response to the loss of the pre individuation unmediated selfhood. The child produces an “ego ideal” by internalizing external attachment to the parents, which then becomes a substitute for the lost narcissism. Primary narcissism governs the later attachment to others in the progression from ‘ego libido’ to ‘object libido’ i.e. the transference of the original ‘ego-libido’ onto another object or person. The individual forms attachments to others and constructs a self-image based on the relationship to these others, and the love for another is a reflection of the love for oneself. In relation to mourning, then, the mourner attempts to resurrect the lost
other in an attempt to maintain a complete sense of self, which has been damaged by the loss of
the reflected self on which the self-image depends. However, this is the crux of the matter. If as
Freud says we instinctively recoil from that which is painful, and mourning is clearly a very
painful experience, we recoil from mourning ‘that makes more life possible’, Freud also
describes mourning as a great riddle and difficult to explain.

... why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful
process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to
account for it. We only see that libido clings to its object and will not renounce those that
are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning.

Freud ends with a consolation for those suffering from mourning, that is, in a healthy mind, it
comes to an end spontaneously, and the libido is free to replace the lost object. However, Freud
later abandoned this claim in The Ego and the Id and suggested that mourning might in fact be
an interminable labour.

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also
know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may
fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And
actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do
not want to relinquish.

We can gain further insight into the difficulty surrounding mourning from psychoanalyst
and essayist Adam Philips, who links the projects of Darwin and Freud, in his book Darwin’s
Worms. Phillips asserts that both changed our perception of human nature, offered us a way of
being in the world without fictions, and “wanted to convert us to the beauty of ephemera.”

Whether or not we read Darwin and Freud, they read us: we speak a version of their
languages. We can’t easily forget what they wanted to persuade us was true. Their stories
are still difficult to get round. And they were both preoccupied, throughout their writing
lives, by the ends of life, in both senses: its purpose, and the place of death, and even of
extinction, in the ways we live – by death as the exemplary fact, the fact that lures us into
fictions.

Darwin and Freud describe our bodily lives as adaptive and resilient, but also vulnerable
and overshadowed by death. For Darwin the end was extinction, the avoidance of which is only

19 ibid
20 Freud, Ernst L., ed. Letters to Sigmund Freud. Trans. Tania Stern and James Stern. New York: Basic,
1960. p 386
21 Phillips, A. Darwin’s Worms op. cit. p 7
22 ibid p 13
achieved by change and adaptation, which in itself involves a loss. For Freud the end is the death of the individual. Death is what lures us towards fictions, which for Freud included religion, and art. While their works were shocking because they asked people to revise their worldview, they also offered a new kind of redemption. This redemption involved giving up the old myths, dreams of perfect happiness, human perfection, and complete knowledge and immortality, so that people might find more realistic happiness in this world rather than any other illusory world. The new understanding facilitated by Freud and Darwin involved an acceptance of suffering as part of the human experience and a new way of understanding why transience has always been so daunting.

Freud’s description of the ‘old myth of redemption’ is particularly significant in our understanding of the need for permanence in relation to artworks. The myth of the immortality of art is a victory of humankind over nature, which is viewed as other and destructive, and ultimately responsible for death, rather than simply part of us. Art represents order, control, and the capturing of nature. Paintings in the Vanitas tradition, while created to remind us of our mortality also represent the illusion of the defeat of mortality through the immortality of art. In order to maintain the myth of arts immortality and humankind’s defeat of nature through art, works must be permanent. The importance of the permanence of art and that this permanence has greater significance for us beyond the durability of artworks, was alluded to by Ann Temkin in her remarks to the conference Mortality /Immortality? The Legacy of 20th century art, which was discussed in chapter 3. Referring to Zoe Leonard’s, Strange Fruit (For David), Temkin said, “Maybe it is not the only thing in the museum that is not forever. Maybe this is not a universe without wounds, reconstructions, scars, or death.” While these words hovered over the papers from that conference, alluded to in the title and the numerous medical analogies, this was the only direct reference to the function of conservation as preserving a larger fiction.

Theories of creativity that approach the subject from the perspective of the individual’s motivation and the social context in which creativity can develop, can help to understand further the link between creativity and immortality. While there are many theories of creativity the two that are most useful in the discussion are the Freudian approach and ‘self-actualisation’.

Freud did not develop a specific theory of creativity, and in fact claimed only an amateur’s knowledge of art in his essay on Michelangelo’s Moses, however the psychoanalytical approach is one by which Freud’s general theory can be applied to a particular area of human behaviour. It is near impossible to make a study of human motivation, to speak about the

23 Temkin, A. “Strange Fruit” in Mortality/Immortality? op cit p 50
functioning of our psyche without exploring some of the basic language of psychoanalysis. Freud did approach the creative individual through two concepts - sublimation and regression. The sexual instinct of the id in pursuit of gratification seeks to reduce tension by the discharge of energy through sexual gratification. However, either the social stricture imposed by the superego or the practical impositions of the ego may prevent the instant gratification of the desires of the id. This leads to frustration unless the energy can be deflected towards another area - sublimation.

The ability to exchange the original sexual aims for another which is no longer sexual, but is psychically related, is called the capacity for sublimation. Sublimation of instinct . . . makes it possible for the higher mental operations, scientific, artistic, ideological activities, to play such an important part in civilized life.  

Freud suggested that creative individuals possess a powerful capacity for sublimation. Thus given sufficient talent a creative person could avoid frustration by sublimating desire to a creative end. However insufficient talent might lead to real frustrations "the libido, following, the origins of the fancies, succeeds by means of regression in revivifying the infantile wishes and so produces neurosis." Regression is a return to an earlier, more primitive form of functioning. Freud’s theory posits a bright future for those very talented individuals and a lifetime of frustration for those who are only mildly talented the unfortunates with no talent at all are condemned to a lifetime of meagre daydreams.

But to those who are not artists the gratification that can be drawn from the springs of phantasy is very limited: their inexorable repressions prevent the enjoyment of all but the meagre daydreams which become conscious. A true artist has more at his disposal. . he possesses the mysterious ability to mould his particular material until it expresses the ideas of his phantasy faithfully.

While the envy most commonly associated with Freud is 'penis envy', his comments of the psychological health of a creative person have opened up the possibility of another kind of envy. If, as he suggests, creative people are the only ones able to live comfortably with the conflicting demands of the psyche, and all others lead lives of frustration or devoid of fantasy would this not lead to 'creativity envy'? Could this possibility be an explanation for art collecting, both by individuals who collect to acquire a nearness to a creativity they do not

25 Ibid, p. 37  
26 Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis 1922 p 314-15
themselves possess but also by cultures who collect the creative output of other possibly more creative peoples in an attempt to acquire an understanding of their creativity?

Freud's theory gives a possible explanation for why an individual might produce creative work, and benefit from doing so in terms of psychological health – the avoidance of frustration which leads to neurosis. It is still not clear why society should encourage and support creative production. I would briefly like to look at self-actualization as an alternative to the narrow view of creativity presented by the Freudian view and outline Terror Management Theory which provides useful insights into much of human behaviour.

Self-actualization can be defined as growth towards psychological maturity and the realization of individual potential. Self-actualization is seen as a manifestation of the life forces which govern the creative processes of nature, and personality itself is regarded as an emerging creative product.  

Like Freudians, self-actualization theorists are not concerned with creativity per se but with psychological health, the exponents of self-actualization theory do focus on the notion of creativity as a universal and essential capacity. Unlike the Freudian perception of creative achievement as a means of assuaging instinctual drives, according to self-actualization theorists, it is a direct expression of the 'creativity motivation'. This theory sees creativity in a very broad sense, that is, as in a potential everyone possesses, and it can find an outlet in every human activity that leads to development. Great achievement in the areas of art and science depend on the amount of talent an individual possesses and the level of an individual's self-actualization. According to this view, creativity does not originate in the same unconscious processes that lead to neurosis but requires a high degree of psychological health and is in fact blocked by neurosis. Neurotic anxiety is a disproportionate reaction to a threat to an individual and leads to repressions and a blocking off activity and awareness as a form of management. Self-actualization on the other hand leads to an ability to confront the world objectively and with an 'openness to experience'. Eric Fromm, one of the leading exponents of self-actualization theory, stresses the importance of this openness for creativity;

[. . ]without projections and without distortions, and this means overcoming in oneself those neurotic 'vices' which necessarily lead to projections and distortions. It means to wake up fully to the awareness of reality, inside and outside oneself. . only if one has

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27 Gilchrist, M, The Psychology of Creativity, p. 43
reached a degree of inner maturity which reduces projection and distortion to a minimum can one experience creatively.  

Neurotic anxiety and self-actualization play a significant role in Terror Management Theory (TMT) although the terminology is different. Exponents of TMT stress the importance of self-esteem (self-actualization) as an anxiety buffer that allows an individual an openness to new experience or new worldviews.

In this section, I will give a very brief overview of Ernest Becker’s basic theory and focus on how this theory was developed by Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski as Terror Management Theory. Becker’s main question was ‘why do we do what we do’? His answer to this question is that anxiety over death, and the denial of the same, is the main motivating force in human behaviour. Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1975 for The Denial of Death in which he elaborated this theory. In order for the individual to function effectively, the fear of death must be repressed. This is achieved by complex social structures which offer the promise of immortality. These social structures create a cultural worldview through which self-esteem is acquired, essential for a successful existence.

Aggression, the will to power, the drive to accumulate [my emphasis] are all case examples in particular contexts of strategies for coping with an even deeper-seated need to deny the reality of death.

Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski developed Terror Management Theory in support of Becker’s claim that the fear of death plays a central role in human behaviour. They embarked on an empirical research program to gather experimental evidence in support of Becker’s claims.

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski began with an investigation into the evolutionary origin of death denial, using the Darwinian assumptions that all life forms share an instinct for survival and that we have evolved to be best suited to our environment. Humans have evolved a large brain, which compensates for our lack of speed and small size to enable us to survive. Because of this brain we can reason solutions to problems and anticipate consequence of different options. We are not only conscious but also self-conscious and possess a linguistically structured self, I, which regulates thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Creativity, our ability to imagine something that does not exist and make it a reality, has played a large part in our evolution. However, coupled with these positive benefits of our large brain is the consciousness of our frailty and vulnerability. This awareness, combined with our instinct for perpetual

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29 Elgee, N. J. Zygon Vol. 33 no. 1 1998 p.5
survival, according to Freud and Otto Rank, fills us with terror. However to manage this terror we have developed “cultural worldviews”. “These are humanly created beliefs about the nature of reality shared by groups of people that served (at least in part) to manage the terror engendered by uniquely human awareness of death.”

Cultural worldviews provide the individual with answers to all the difficult cosmological questions such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘what will happen to me when I die?’ They offer either symbolic immortality through reputation and wealth or literal immortality through reincarnation or a new life in heaven. Each culture makes demands in return for immortality and these form the code of behaviour of that culture.

Through acceptance of these codes an individual is seen as a valuable member of the society, and this perception results in the individual having self-esteem. “The resulting perception that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe constitutes self-esteem. Self-esteem is the primary psychological mechanism by which culture serves its death-denying function.”

... all cultures provide precise information regarding death and afford opportunities for individuals to live forever – either symbolically by producing great works or amassing great fortunes that extend beyond the individuals lifetime and therefore serve as physical testament to a person’s existence, or through religious beliefs ...

Self-esteem offers protection against the anxiety of annihilation. It does this by the process of socialization. The process of socialization is “initiated by the neonate’s unlimited capacity for the experience of primal anxiety, especially in novel situations”. While babies do not have an awareness of death, they do experience terror when a need is unmet and so form attachments with the primary carer to ensure nourishment and protection. This attachment provides the baby with a sense of safety and through this attachment, the baby is socialised. As the baby grows and learns simple tasks, the carer rewards the baby with approval. Similarly the baby learns that being ‘good’ is also met with approval while not being good, being bad, is met with disapproval. The baby soon equates being good with being safe and being bad with vulnerability and helplessness. Through this process being good and the resulting self esteem become an ‘anxiety

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30 Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski “Tales from the Crypt: on the Role of Death in Life.” in Zygon op. cit.
p. 12
31 ibid p. 13
32 ibid
33 ibid.
buffer'. "Self-esteem is now derived from doing the right thing in terms of the culturally
prescribed standards of conduct associated with specific social roles provided by the culture."\textsuperscript{34}

This analysis leads to three important (and disquieting) implications. Although self-
esteeem is considered a universal need, its mode of operation are both culturally and historically
relative. The particulars vary from one culture or time to another but the fact that there are public
expressions of personal worth remains a constant. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski give
the examples of avarice and polygamy as examples of time and place differences. In the Middle
Ages avarice was considered a sin while greed became a socially acceptable and even desirable
trait in the U.S.A. in the 1980s. Having many wives in polygamous cultures is considered
prestigious, whereas in monogamous cultures it is a crime punishable by imprisonment. The
implication of this is that there are no absolute standards by which we can judge right from
wrong, good from evil and there is no way to feel good about ourselves without socially
prescribed notions of right and wrong.

There are potentially an infinite number of worldviews each of which is held to be an
absolute representation of reality by the individuals in a culture. There is no objective way to
judge the beliefs of a culture, therefore the individuals must rely on faith," the conviction with
which it is held as self-evidently true", to preserve their particular world view. This leads to the
conclusion that all worldviews are religious in nature even if they proclaim to be completely
secular. e.g. communism. This theory powerfully echoes Durkheim's view. He saw religion as
"a form of authority that powerfully links the individual to society"\textsuperscript{35} and asserted that
everything could be explained by religion.

The mere existence of other worldviews poses a threat to the absolute truth of our
worldview and therefore threatens its anxiety-buffering capacity. This instigates defensive
responses. People react in several different ways to exposure to other world-views. These
include attempting to convert the new group to ones own worldview, derogate the worldview of
others by viewing them as less civilised, pre-literate, and even ridiculous, or assimilate the other
worldview in the worldview of the majority, which has the effect of neutralising of opposing
beliefs. Assimilation is the usual strategy adopted in the artworld which traditionally absorbs
protest, for example the assimilation of the avant-garde. Other possible strategies are more
extreme and result in the annihilation of the other, proving the superiority of ones worldview.

\textsuperscript{34} ibid p.14
\textsuperscript{35} Durkheim, \textit{The Elemental Forms of Religious Life}. p.xii
This inability to tolerate those whose death-denying vision of reality, (and thus a mutually exclusive claim to immortality), combined with the fact that we create differences even when significant differences do not exist, enabling us to test our world view, does not bode well for the future of humankind. However, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski showed in experiments that individuals whose self-esteem was elevated were more tolerant and accepting of difference proving its 'anxiety buffer' effect. This suggests that individuals and societies who are confident and secure in their worldview would be more tolerant of the worldviews of others. To move beyond the stasis of terror management strategies and to allow us to be converted to the beauty of the ephemeral it is necessary to be willing to be open to the experience of mourning. As Phillips put it “Refusal to mourn is refusal to live. Mourning is the necessary suffering that makes more life possible”.\textsuperscript{36}

As a consequence of the deeply ingrained nature of worldviews there is an assumption that some of our modes of behaviour are ‘natural’ and therefore unavoidable. For example, it is obvious in most of the material relating to the conservation of art that to conserve is the natural choice, the default behaviour, and any other solution would require a shift from the norm. However, what is natural may easily be confused with a cultural predisposition or a prejudice, and in order to understand why we make the decisions we do it is necessary to examine all ‘the givens’. Our notion of what is natural has, in the past been shaken by the realisation that the world is not flat, and that we have evolved rather than been created, leading to the conclusion that what we consider natural is in fact culturally determined and therefore not natural at all but relative. There is the added difficulty in an investigation of this sort that, as Adam Phillips suggests, we are often a mystery to ourselves, and given the unconscious nature of our desires and our ability to repress difficult realities, we, can in fact obscure our motivations.

The experiment of Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski demonstrates that not only do individuals avoid awareness of mortality they react negatively when that realisation is forced upon them. We are in fact surrounded by reminders of the fragility of human existance, however as long as these are constant we can become immune to them.

The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when ‘death does not appear under its own name’, in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it, precisely where we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Phillips Darwin’s Worms op cit p 27
\textsuperscript{37} Bauman, Z. op cit p 7
Sacrifice and Grief

How can we speak of grief and mourning? There are things; events, horrors, place of sorrow and love for which we have no words. Grief can leave us mute, it can paralyse – there is nothing more to be said, nothing more to be done. W H Auden tells us this – “nothing now can ever come to any good.” Yet, his very telling proves him wrong. Sometimes grief can be very eloquent and in its eloquence rather than presenting us with a privileged view, which excludes those we have not shared the experience, can provide a vehicle for understanding.

In this chapter I will discuss three art works which act as such a vehicle, Untitled (Portrait of Dad) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Strange Fruit (for David) by Zoe Leonard and initially one of my own pieces In Memory (2003). These works are ephemeral and embody the experience of mourning. In ephemeral art works, i.e. works in which the decay or disappearance is an essential element of the work, the art world is deprived of its requirement for permanence, the durability which enables art to fulfil its role in creating the myth of immortality. These works can be read as a form of sacrifice, something given up for a greater gain. The greater gain in these works is an understanding of the role of permanence in art as contributing to our death denying cultural worldview and why transience challenges that function. We also learn about our fear of intimacy and the hierarchy of knowledge which values detached ‘scientific’ understanding over intimate engagement. This hierarchy is significant in the decision made by

1 Auden W. H. ‘Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone’ in Heaney, S. & Ted Hughes (eds) The Rattle Bag, London: Faber & Faber 1982 p 406
museums about their object e.g. it is frequently used as justification for the retention of cultural property by museums when there is a risk that the objects once returned will be used or even buried. In discussing these works there is a risk that the central experience may be lost for they demand an engagement which does not sit comfortably with the detachment and the wariness of the over personal response which in the hierarchy of knowledge is expected from the academic world. Finally, I will explore this myth of detachment and relate the experiences of these ephemeral works to my own local knowledge as an artist and as a mourner.

Though my own experience of bereavement was separated from Auden’s by time, place, gender, sexuality and age his localised specific grief spoke for me when I was made mute by grief. His words spoke of my sense of meaninglessness in loss.

In 1995 my son died. My beautiful little boy had a brain tumour; he was four and a half years old. My son did not die suddenly; I did not lose him all in one instance but millions of times over and over again. I lost him first the day of the diagnosis, and again bit by bit with every operation, every session of devastating treatment, each slow moment of deterioration. His death was a specific point of loss but it was neither the only one nor an end of my loss. I have continued to lose him every day since. Some time after he died I realised I could no longer continue to make art as I had done. The world inside my skin was irreparably altered and like those who rend their garments in grief I wanted my exterior world to reflect this change – I wanted things to be ‘never the same again’. An opportunity arose which allowed me to make one final work, a memory work for my son. – In 2003, Salina Art Centre in Kansas issued a call for proposals for a show relating to memory – the proposal I submitted was selected. My work took as a starting point the collective activity of patchwork quilt making.

While waiting for the birth of my son, I had made quilts, both the real thing – a patchwork for his bed, but also fragile paper quilts. The desire to make quilts at these different stages in my life, in his life, were not clearly structured thoughts but visceral responses, they reflected my desire to protect and care for my baby. For my Salina quilt, I printed two hundred and forty photographic images on silk squares. These were typical happy family snaps – the day he was born, his first tooth, in a high chair with food all over his face, a day on the beach, with our cat, - the type of photos we all know and own. These are the memories we share. I had these posted to people on the Salina Centre’s mailing list asking them to come to the gallery and place these squares in a structure I had created. The structure already contained photos of events which not everyone shares – official details of birth and death, the midwife’s record, the list of drugs used in an attempt to sustain life, hospital beds, feeding tubes, the apparatus of healing changing
over time to the apparatus of dying. Near the centre of the piece is the instruction, "do not resuscitate". This was to be a modern quilt making – a shared labour, however, this quilt would also be unmade.

Mary O'Neill, January 2013

Those who participate could come to the gallery before the show closed to remove and keep an image if they wished. Also, the ink with which the images were printed was not fixed and would eventually fade with exposure to light. The work was also destined to be incomplete as some of the images were sent to people who would not be able to attend the gallery and some would inevitably be lost or forgotten.

This work was more than a gesture of love and remembering. It was also an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task of perfect protection and perfect remembering. The main piece was accompanied by some text, which was printed on a long strip of silk. In order to read the text the reader would have to pull the silk through their hands. The action of pulling it through ones hands would eventually erase the text, so that like the images it too would disappear as a result of the process of viewing. This piece of fabric was intended to be placed on the ground.
In retrospect the paper quilts I had made before he was born, seem to be unconscious warnings that our lives are fragile and that ultimately we all fail in our desire to keep our loved ones perfectly safe. This final quilt was an accepting of loss as the only permanent state, the loss I now experience every day – the loss of the memory of Sam.

When I visit my son's grave it does not remind me of him. The headstone does not recall his memory for me. However, it does provide me with a site where I can remember. I have planted flowers on his grave and have left toys, which have become faded and rusted - these remind me of him. There is a distinction between what is often our final public obligation to our loved ones – the placing of a permanent marker, a memorial for example, and the activity that takes place at that memorial – the remembering and the mourning. Judith Butler, writing of the death of Jacques Derrida, says "The act of mourning thus becomes a continued way of 'speaking to' the other who is gone, even though the other is gone, in spite of the fact the other is gone, precisely because the other is gone."2

Tending the grave provides me with a function; I once again have a role. When our roles as mothers, wives, lovers, husbands, children are withdrawn by death we can become mourners. When our task of caring for a loved one is taken away from us, we have a new task - to tend a patch of ground, a stone monument, a seat in a wood. These sites of mourning mean that not only do we segregate the dead we also segregate the bereaved who are engaged in the act of remembering, sparing others the embarrassment of not knowing what to say, or their own mutism. So strong is the reaction to the bereaved that in his book describing his experience of grieving for his wife C S Lewis suggested taking this segregation even further. 'Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.' 3

Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Zoe Leonard engage with all these issues – profound personal experiences of loss which almost defy expression and from which in daily life most people instinctively turn away in mute embarrassment. This distinction between the permanent public memorial and the private ritual acts of remembering and mourning is significant for an understanding of ephemeral griefworks. These are not monumental stone public memorials, but the embodiment of mourning through which the artist enables the public to witness, and like the work I made and the flowers I leave for my son, they are ephemeral. Ephemeral works are concerned with the act of remembering and losing rather than memorialization. They are works both in and of memory and they embody the obsessive remembering associated with mourning.

as described by Freud. In the face of the awful knowledge of the bereaved these works reject the myth of immortality offered by permanent artworks and instead offer the opportunity to embrace transience.

In the hierarchy of knowledge, we tend to value the analytic, the scientific, the written academic text over other forms of knowledge. Generally, we place very little value on local knowledge. Local or intimate knowledge because of its specificity is not scientific. Its subjectivity, lack of distance, the risks involved in creating a general principle from a single event, and our overwhelming fear of sentimentality make us uncomfortable. However I would suggest that all knowledge is in some way local knowledge and that specificity rather than being problematic is what makes art distinct from other areas of inquiry and an endless source of fascination to us. In scientific investigations one tends to attempt to find the rule, however, in art we are concerned with the anomalies. I am not suggesting that all local knowledge is equal, in fact, some local knowledge is more useful than others. In order to make study possible or manageable we create pseudo-categories, which do not exist in the lived experience. Life is full of blurred boundaries. The dualities of mind/body, public/private, scientific/local knowledge are never really separated, they are in practice concomitant. When we know something through personal experience we know it in a different way to something learnt through observation and testing. (I am sure everyone has had the experience of returning to a book, an art work, a piece of music which had once seemed uninspiring to find new insights, new knowledge. It is not because the work has changed, but we have changed and we bring our new experiences to the work.) When we speak of gut reactions and 'feelings in our bones', we refer to knowledge which is not conscious, a visceral knowing which we often cannot articulate. The more dependent we are on proof and verification the less we trust these messages, this evidence of our animal embodied selves. This desire to disassociate ourselves from animal existence is evidence of our death denial, the drive to free ourselves from our 'mere' biological needs and an attempt to have a transcendent meaningful life. Everyday we see evidence of the uncontrolled animal characteristic and so it is little wonder that we fear and recoil from the knowledge of our bodies. Not only the evidence of our aging bodies but the atrocities of war, the horrors of the pain that people inflict on each other has made us afraid of ourselves; we are no longer to be trusted. This is not an argument for an abandonment of methodology and rigour, merely a reminder that intimate knowledge has a value and our fear of it rests not in what it actually tells us about a particular event but what it tells us about intimacy itself.

\[4\] For a discussion of local knowledge see Raffles, H. op. cit.
Intimacy is demanding and risky, it requires honesty and trust; it is profoundly private, and internal. It creates it own space, ‘they are in their own world’. Intimacy is reciprocal, it involves a relationship; it is aspirational, we hope to achieve something from intimacy, fulfilment, happiness, and identity. There is an eloquence to intimacy – ‘we speak each other’s language’, ‘we know each other so well.’ ‘A touch, a gesture, a look can mean so much.’ Our intimate relationships are filled with hope and the risk of disappointment.

The intimate knowledge which some artists share with us can also make a demand; to experience their work we must be open to the intimacy the experience offers. If intimacy is demanding it is also powerfully affective. Like intimacy, the art museums in which we view these works are governed by rules of appropriateness. The myth of museums is that they are post-enlightenment secular institutions devoted to objective truth and scientific knowledge. The act of looking at works of art has been included in the category of rational. Appreciating the aesthetic is deemed to be a higher way of knowing, for many it is the highest, akin to or substituting for the spiritual. For it to be retained in our culture it has to be assimilated to the rational. Carol Duncan argues that far from being temples of reason museums are inherently ritual spaces which she defines as being ‘associated with religious practices – with the realm of belief, magic, real or symbolic sacrifices, miraculous transformations, or overpowering changes of consciousness’. Rather than viewing ritual behaviour in ‘public’ institutions as problematic, either controlling or inhibiting, I would suggest that it is through the ritual that we are able to have an intimate experience of works of art in the company of strangers. The museum, like the religious buildings on which they are modelled, provides an ‘out of time’ place where ‘miraculous transformations’ can take place. Art is often the site of boundary blurring where those mind/body, public/private, appropriate / inappropriate sacred/profane dualities lose definition.

From Duncan’s description of the museum as ritual space I would like to focus on one of the aspects she lists, that of real or symbolic sacrifice. Emile Durkheim, writing in 1915, is at pains to point out that the study of religion, while interesting in itself, is not the sufficient motivation for carrying out his project. It is the underlying human desires that religion represents, that interest him. He suggests that religion not only enriches our mind but has formed it, that our very categories of understanding have been formed by religion. I share this view and suggest that rather than seeing much of contemporary society and its art as secular, which

6 Durkheim, E. The elementary forms of the religious life, Allen and Unwin, 1915
ignores the interplay between past and present, perhaps it would be more accurate to view it as post-religious. Post in that it follows on from, and is contingent upon religion. It is 'the religious nature of man', the 'essential and permanent aspect of humanity' as described by Durkheim which is relevant to this research. There are obvious superficial links between art and religious activity, for example, the word 'curate' refers both to a member of the clergy and to have responsibility for a collection or an exhibition, artists are frequently spoken of in terms of a demiurge which refers both to the creator of the universe and a crafts person, and the building in which art is displayed and appreciated, owes its atmosphere to the cathedral. Significantly for contemporary art, within a belief system there is an opportunity for objects to be re-categorised e.g. from profane to sacred, by certain people within the belief group. This reflects closely Arthur Danto’s theory of the Artworld and other more recent discussions of intrinsic value. It is hardly surprising that there are strong links between religious activity and art institution for as W. Robertson Smith says “Nothing appeals so strongly as religion to the conservative instincts;” and what are museums but the embodiment of our conservative instincts.

There are several aspect of sacrifices that are relevant for an understanding of ephemeral art works.

**Sacrifice n. & v.**

1. **n.** a the act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else more important or worthy. b a thing given up in this way. c the loss entailed in this.
2. **v.** 1 tr. give up (a thing) as a sacrifice. 2 tr. (foll. by to) devote or give over to. 3 tr. (also absol.) offer or kill as a sacrifice. adv. sacrificial.

In the OED definition it is ‘the act of giving something up for the sake of something else more important or worthy’ and ‘a deliberate loss for a greater gain’ are useful in an understanding of
the possible motivation to produce Ephemeral Art. There are other aspects of sacrifice not mentioned in this definition that are also significant for this study.

Durkheim credits Robertson Smith with having revolutionised the theory of sacrifice by identified two important aspects in his *Lectures on the Religions of the Semites* 1894 - "In the first place it is a repast: its substance is food. Secondly, it is a repast in which the worshippers who offer it take part, along with the god to whom it is offered." Sharing a meal forms a bond between the participants, both a bond of friendship but also a more significant bond on a cellular level. Our cells are made up of the food we consume – if we share food we share common cells – a bond of artificial kinship. In Table-Bond Theory through the bond of sharing food a group confirms its solidarity.

*Take this all of you and eat it.*

Leon Marillier, a follower of Durkheim and a teacher of Marcel Mauss contributed the notion that the sacrifice has a magical element. Mauss and Hubert contributed the idea of substitution, that the thing offered is in fact a substitute for a human sacrifice. This also suggests that by the process of the sacrifice the thing sacrificed becomes transformed in some way. The word sacrifice is derived from the Latin *Sacrificium*: *Sacer* (holy) and *facere* (to make). The thing sacrificed is made special, is made holy. Sacrifice is a form of atonement.

*Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body, this is my blood.*

Food is fundamentally important in the sacrifice, not lavish feasts but ordinary food, the food associated with survival, the substance of everyday life for example bread and wine. The ordinariness of the food offering increases the link with the sacrificer, this is what I eat and I am sharing it. To make a sacrifice of ones property is a sacrifice of a part of oneself. Significantly the thing sacrificed has no intrinsic efficacy.

Sacrifice is a rite of passage, which takes place at crisis point in the lives of sacrificer - to ensure the person or groups survival in the face of danger illness or death or in some cases, as in

12 Holy Mass, Liturgy of the Eucharist, Consecration.
13 Hubert, H. & Marcel Mauss. *Sacrifice: its nature and function*, Cohen and West, 1964
the sacrifice of a scapegoat, a messenger to the dead. The aim of sacrifice is not destruction – if destruction was the aim there are more efficient methods than sacrifice – destruction is the means of sacrifice. Godfrey Ashby points out that sacrifice must be seen as benevolent. The argument for disconnecting sacrifice from violence is a subject also addressed by John Milbank in his essay “Stories of Sacrifice” who stresses the relationship between sacrifice and gift.

Untitled (Portrait of Dad) Felix Gonzalez-Torres is a mound of candy in white wrappers spread like a carpet or a mound in the corner of a gallery. Visitors are invited to take and eat a candy allowing the viewer a literal consumption. This work is one of a series of Candy Spills, which can use different candy and dimensions depending on the site and subtitle. The original Untitled candy spill weighed 79.5kg (175 lbs), which was the same weight as that of Gonzalez-Torres dying lover.

Take this all of you and eat it.

The ‘work of repair’ in untitled by Felix Gonzalez-Torres is not immediately obvious, but when one learns that the sweets are cough drops, which his father took in large quantities to relieve the discomfort of throat cancer they function not as reminder of a treat, something small

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15 p. 10
16 John Millbank is Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of Virginia His article “Stories of Sacrifice” theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/contagion/contagion02_Milbank.pdf accessed 29/6/2006
17 Temkim, A. op cit p. 47
and sweet but also as an attempt to repair. Equally, the obsessiveness of grief exists in the quantity. There isn’t one single cough sweet to open but the sound of a life’s worth of crinkling cellophane and sucking.

*Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body, this is my blood.*

The sweets - Luden’s Honey Lemon - in ‘the spills’ take on an unforeseen significance when they make the transition from the private consumption of a cough sweet to the public consumption of an artwork. The line between public and private is blurred and the transition from private to public is again reversed when the viewer eats the sweet so that its journey ends in the private experience of the visitor. This ephemeral work exists in a space where individuals create their own rituals. Like rituals there is an element of sharing in Untitled (Portrait of Dad), the viewer can take a piece of the work away with them, and they are asked to participating in the realisation of the work. The use of food echoes the role of food in many mourning rituals. The presence of food in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres not only act as a powerful stimulant to memory but also has another significance, it reflects Catholic imagery, nowhere more strongly than in the Candy Spill series. These works bring to mind one of the basic tenets of Catholic belief, transubstantiation. Transubstantiation like the Virgin Birth and Papal Infallibility require unquestioning faith. It refers to the conversion of the Eucharistic elements, bread, and wine, into the body and blood of Christ. The bread and wine no longer symbolise Christ but are Christ. The Body and blood of Christ is then consumed by the participants. This literal consumption is what Gonzalez-Torres is offering. The poet Li-Young Lee in *From Blossoms* also uses images of food and consumption to express the longing to be reunited with those whose loss he mourns -

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilance of peach.  

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Once we consume a sweet, it becomes joined to us at a cellular level. The taste of the
sweet in our mouths is just the beginning of a process which will end with the digested sweet
being transported around our bodies to every cell giving us a connection with the other viewers
of the work.

Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body, this is my blood. Do this in
remembrance of me.

Leonard ate a piece of fruit she ‘repaired’ the peel with wire, zips and threads. She had recently
been to India where she observed the frugality of the culture that meant that nothing was wasted.
This fact combined with a move to Alaska, where fresh fruit had to be flown in, inspired
Leonard to use the normally discarded portion of the fruit as a material. Leonard made the work
as a form of mourning for a recently deceased close friend, David Wojnarowicz, who had died
of AIDS.
In these artworks, there is a large element of 'work', a task to be performed, and a 'labour of love'. In Strange Fruit, this work takes the form of the traditional work of women, stitching and repairing. The poignancy of the work is that the attempts to repair are so obviously in vain and suggests our complete powerlessness in the face of death and more significantly being left behind. These are not the artworks of those who are dying, who in fact often strive for immortality through art, by leaving something permanent behind, but the work of those who must watch and feel useless.

This 'anti-monument' and the materials that comprise it did not start out life as an art work. When Leonard first began repairing fruit in 1993 it was a private act rather than an artwork intended for public consumption. Significantly, she first exhibited the work in her apartment allowing for a gradual transition from the private space of a mourning activity to public exhibition.

To highlight the role that ephemerality plays in this work I would like to discuss a permanent work by Leonard to demonstrate that the deliberate use of ephemerality or permanence rather than assuming permanence as the standard lends but greater power to both transience and durability. Leonard's Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman (1991) is a set of five silver gelatin prints, and as the title suggests shows the head of a bearded woman in a bell jar. The original head is in the collection of the Musee Orfila.
Leonard was unable to find any information about this woman other than that she had lived at the turn of the century and that she had been a circus performer. Leonard also photographs her friend Jennifer Miller, who is a performer and has her own circus, Circus Amok; Miller is also bearded. Unlike the traditional relationship between sitter/model and artist, Leonard views these photographs as collaborations. (Jennifer Miller is paid royalties from the sale of the photographs). Leonard would also appear to be collaborating with the woman in *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, a collaboration with the dead. In *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Leonard attempts to return dignity, to ‘de-freak’ a woman who has been treated as a spectacle in both life and death. She suggests that it is not the beard that is strange but the decapitation and taxidermy. She says ‘I wanted to slow people down enough so that they would begin to question her presentation rather than her appearance.’

In this work there is an interesting relationship between the ephemeral and the permanent elements. Throughout this investigation the literature constantly reinforces the idea that transience is difficult to appreciate because it reminds us of the most difficult of all transience, that is, our own. We take it for granted that when we die our bodies will be disposed of in some way, either by burial on land or at sea or burning. Even if a body is to be used for scientific

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research it will eventually by disposed of in one of these two ways. Despite the difficulty of thinking about death, most people make provision for their funeral and we assume that bodies are treated with respect and dignity. In the cases where this taboo is transgressed, as in the racist attacks on bodies in a hospital mortuary, the retention of body parts at Alderhay hospital, or the site of dismembered body parts being displayed as trophies of war, we are shocked and outraged. Cultures where the display of embalmed bodies is a form of honouring their dead are less comfortable with this custom when they become part of the ‘democratic, western, capitalist system’. Visits to Lenin’s tomb, for example, were halted when the Soviet Union relaxed its borders during the Glasnost era, lest this custom be seen as primitive by foreigners. The placing of the head of a woman in a bell jar and exhibiting it in a museum, like the retention of aboriginal peoples bodies in museum stores is treating them as other, a subject for curiosity and inquiry and could be viewed as profoundly disrespectful. The photographs Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman are memorials to the woman but also they are permanent and durable reminder of this disrespect.

In this work it is the deliberate use of permanence that is shocking. In the first instance, the permanence is the preserving of the woman’s head and in the second the permanence of the photographs. Here Leonard is using permanence of a powerful tool and intrinsic to the work just as the impermanence of Strange Fruit is a vital element. When we take permanence as the norm, assume every art work is durable we rob permanence of some of its impact. Just as by equating ephemerality with the unimportant we loose its value.

While the ephemeral works of Leonard and Gonzalez-Torres deal with a difficult and potentially distressing subject, any element of shock has been avoided in favour of gentleness. One of the criticisms levelled at Gonzalez-Torres’ work is the lightness of touch, even those critics who admire his work use terms like “Hallmark cards” and “lightweight” Equally in Strange Fruit, Zoe Leonard, normally associated with more challenging images, achieves a quality of gentleness. However it is precisely this gentleness that allows the viewer access to the work and creates the power of these works. To shock the viewer in these circumstances would

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20 There were obviously numerous political reasons for the decline in the Lenin cult taking place at the time which are explored by Trevor Smith in his article “The collapse of the Lenin personality cult in Soviet Russia, 1985-1995”. (political leader Vladimir Ilich Lenin) in The Historian 1998. available at http://www.hiphbeam.com/library/docFree.asp?DOCID=1G1:20427122 accessed 29/6/2006. I visited Russia as part of an group of artists hosted by Artist’s Union and my observation are based on comments made by artist when I enquired about the closure.

21 Susan Tallman in her article “The Ethos of the Edition The Stacks of Felix Gonzales-Torres” describes his work as “lightweight Minimalism” and Lane Relyea in “what’s love got to do with it?” Frieze describes his multiples as “like so many uninscribed Hallmark cards.”
be so much easier and there are many works dealing with this subject, which are shocking. In *The Wisdom of Art*, Roland Barthes referring to the physical lightness of the work of Cy Twombly states; ‘. . . the being of things is not in their heaviness but their lightness: which would perhaps confirm Nietzsche’s proposition: “What is good is light “[what is godly moves on tender feet].” Yes, the Candy spills are light, but it is an unbearable lightness, not of being but dying: these confections cover a world of loss and mourning, an overwhelming sense of endlessness, permanently repeatable impermanence. This work goes on and on like the loss it represents, these sickly clowing sweets, hundreds to be opened and consumed like the endlessness of mourning, presented in the powerhouse of immortality the museum.

Two significant historical events hung over the exhibition *Present Tense: Nine Artists in the Nineties*, which included the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Firstly, the millennium is drawing to a close, which resulted in the inevitable reflection on the state of the world. Secondly, the works were made against the background of the AIDS pandemic. Both these events result in the works and accompanying essay unsurprisingly being loaded with a sense of time and of ending. However, rather than being an oppressive sense of ending there is an overwhelming acceptance of the fragility of existence. In the introductory essay to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Gary Garrels discusses the choice of artists in this exhibition who, although geographically dispersed share a sensibility which highlights an aspect of contemporary life. He describes the modesty of the materials used, the non-monumental and intimate quality of the works included. He is careful to point out that while these works embrace the emotional life and beauty they are never sentimental or overtly dramatic.

In comments about *InMemory* the lack of sentimentality is also referred to

The squares of this “quilt”, brought to the art center . . . by strangers who received them in the mail, represent intimate memories which O’Neill shares willingly with people she has never met. Admirable for its unflinching candor and artistic generosity, this piece is also notable for the way the artist eschews sentimentality. . . In this work the artist is giving us an honest and fearless glimpse of maternal memories now interwoven inextricably with the clinical realities of illness and death.23

I wonder why, why does almost every critic, every theorist who discusses Gonzalez-Torres’ work felt the need to assure us that we are not in the realms of the sentimental? Do they

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23 Traxler, P. Salina Art Center Talk, March 25 2004
protest too much? Are the works in fact sentimental? And yet also powerful, beautiful, speaking about the universal experience of loss. When Shakespeare said

Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot chose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.  

Of course he was being sentimental.

In a BBC Radio 4, programme which discussed the early days of the Terence Higgins Trust, an organisation set up in 1982 too provides support for AIDS sufferers and their carers, the panel all referred to the differentness of the funerals for those who died of AIDS. These funerals were celebratory and flamboyant and unlike the conventional British funeral. Because the deceased were generally young as were the mourners, and had experienced a certain amount of rejection by the main stream of society because of their sexuality and the negative view of AIDS sufferers in the early days, the existing funeral rituals offered by society were no longer appropriate. These deaths then required a new form of ritual because of the untimeliness of the deaths, the social exclusion the deceased and the bereaved. In his book Death, Grief and Mourning Geoffrey Gorer address the lack of ritual and the consequences for society. He states that a society, which does not provide customs for mourning are failing to provide its members with the support they require.

These artists have embraced Freud’s challenge to live with transience. In the face of the ultimate randomness of death, these works celebrate randomness, in the fragility of ephemeral materials, and by, in the case of Untitled (Portrait of Dad) the randomness of public participation. Gonzalez-Torres, acutely aware of his own mortality, incorporated a plan for the survival and future existence of his work into the concept of the piece. His vision for the future allowed for a process of evolution whereby obsolete elements could be replaced by more ‘successful’ available materials. While it seemed appropriate to continually remake Untitled (Portrait of Dad) and even, to alter the work to suit different exhibitions of the piece as long as the artist’s intention and the participation of the public was preserved, this was a highly specific strategy designed as an intrinsic part of the work. Strange Fruit (for David) required a different strategy for survival and in this case, it was to allow the work to rot. This is the opposite of the mummification of conservation, the projection of a life through transience. This conclusion

26 Gorer Geoffrey. Death, Grief and Mourning. “They clearly no longer had any guidance from ritual as to the way to treat a self-confessed mourner: “ p.14
relates not only to the artist’s desired future for their work but to the works themselves and the contexts in which they were made. *Strange Fruit* refers to the death of a specific individual and Zoe Leonard’s effort to live with grief; she herself described it as an attempt to repair herself. Freud originally stated that grief eventually comes to a spontaneous end, he later was less certain about this when he experience grief personally after the death of his daughter, however it is true to say that generally the intense experience of grief and mourning eventually fade. Like grief, *Strange Fruit* will eventually fade but not necessarily disappear completely. However, *Untitled (Portrait of Dad)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, while made in response to the death of a particular individual was made in the context of multiple bereavements. This work could be remade; for Gonzalez-Torres there wasn’t one act of ‘grief work’ but a constant repetition.

While art theory and cultural theory can provide vivid illuminations of aspects of human experience they can all too easily become a framework for making hierarchies. Many of the most profoundly significant aspects of human experience are not rational or irrational, but non-rational. We need to deploy reason to structure our analysis of such experiences to enable us to understand and discuss them – but not as a superior detached force, but as an engaged companion in the experience. It is unreasonable to dismiss core human experiences as irrational, and consistently to exclude or diminish the particular, the local, and the subjective in the name of the abstract. In his book *Creative Evolution* Bergson discusses the relationship between instinct, sympathy and intuition. He states; “Instinct is Sympathy. [. . . ] [I]t is to the very inwardness of life that intuition leads us”\(^27\). And of the relationship between intelligence and intuition he states; “[I]ntuition may enable us to grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us, and indicates a means of supplementing it.”\(^28\)

These works are displayed on the gallery floor suggesting material brought to its knees. There are no gilded frames, no plinths, no heroic catafalque to honour the noble dead, but ordinary materials pared down to their essentials, affirming the status of anti-monument. In relinquishing the myth of permanence and immortality, by sacrificing durability, they speak a truth that may be too hard to bear and so easily dismissed as ‘sentimental’. Through their ephemerality, through their shift in value orientation, they offer us knowledge not just of mourning but of art and the role it plays in our worldview, they ‘speak’ about the unspeakable which renders us mute, they speak of love and being left behind. What is significant about these works is that they are active, unlike death works e.g. death masks, which are static – the frozen

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\(^28\) Ibid. p. 177
moment of death; these works begin with death and are alive. Their very transience creates a new life, if only the surrogate life of art. If we sacrifice our need for permanence, if we can make the shift in value orientation that transience requires we have an opportunity to appreciate the here and now, changing work alive in the moment and soon to be gone, like our lives, and the lives of those we love, they are chancy and short. This is the lesson of ephemerality, the knowledge in these works.
The very act of thinking objectively about distress places us at one remove from the distress … But if dissociation is a necessary part of clear thinking it may also be a defence against thinking. ¹

I have divided this chapter into two sections; both deal with the same subject but are written differently. If the laws of physics were other than they are, I would like them both to be read at the same time to mirror the possibility of thinking in different modes simultaneously. The strategy of parallel texts is not new and has been used before, most notably by Julia Kristeva in her essay “Stabat Mater”. However, given the bounds of reality, one text must be read before the other or, as in Kristeva’s essay, the reader must jump from one text to another. The order in which they are presented here, which does not reflect the sequence of writing, may appear to privilege academic over tacit knowledge, suggesting a hierarchy to which I do not subscribe. However, a text may leave the reader with a residue, a flavour, and in deciding between the possibilities of parallel text, or a sequential order I made a decision on the basis of ‘flavour’. The order I have chosen represents the residue I would like the reader to be left with. These two texts respond to the difficulty raised by Bowlby of thinking objectively about distress and the risk that the difficulty may result in an avoidance of thinking about the subject at all. This is particularly significant when faced with works that ask us not only to think but to feel.

To begin, I will briefly summarize the significance of the term ‘abject’ in reference to art, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, as it has become synonymous with the art of that period. I will highlight those aspects of Kristeva’s elaboration of the abject which may help in an understanding of the works under discussion. On the basis of the insights offered by a number of psychological and psychoanalytical theories of mourning I will conclude this chapter by suggesting that the task of grieving represented in the ephemeral works of Dadang Christanto and Araya Rasdjmirearnsook offer the possibility of moving beyond the abject. In this chapter I will also discuss the web-based work 1001 Nights by Barbara Campbell. Like the works of Christanto and Rasdjmirearnsook this piece can be read as a form of searching for and of speaking to the dead.

It [sculpture] lends its space to the most unsayable aspects of our corporeal experience, to the frontiers of dreams, of pleasure, of speechlessness, and of death.2

In the 1980s and 90s there were several exhibitions and publications which discussed contemporary art in terms of the abject as formulated by Julia Kristeva in The Powers of Horror, which was first translated into English in 1982.3 These focused on artworks, which capitalised on the affective power of horror and repulsion associated with abjection. Most notable was a 1993 exhibition at the Whitney Museum, New York, entitled Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art, which gave rise to common usage of the term ‘Abject Art’. This exhibition featured works by Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick, Paul McCarthy, Gilbert and George, Robert Gober, Carolee Schneemann, Kiki Smith and Jake and Dinos Chapman. ‘Abject Art’ as defined by this exhibition addressed those bodily functions which are deemed inappropriate for public display or discussion. There was a strong emphasis on the feminist reading of abjection – the view that the female body and its associated fluids are seen as repulsive and unacceptable in a patriarchal social order. Michael Wilson associate editor of ArtForum and Denis Hollier, Professor of French literature at New York University and editor of October, both argued that this exhibition misused Kristeva’s term. For Wilson ‘abject art marked a transition (at least in the art world) from the ‘80s careerism of American Psycho (Bret Easton Ellis's book hit stores in 1991) to the jaded slackerdom of Kevin Smith's 1994 movie Clerks’. . . The label "abject art" suggests a fittingly belated use/abuse of Julia Kristeva's essay on the

A comprehensive bibliography of works that address this reading of the abject is available at http://www.ncf.edu/hassold/abject/abject_bibliography.htm (accessed 6/1/2006)
scatological impulse. Hollier pointed out the contradictory nature of an exhibition devoted to abject art. "What is abject about it? Everything was very neat; the objects were clearly art works. They were on the side of the victor." (Hollier) This is an issue also addressed by Hal Foster in his essay, ‘Obscene, Abject, Traumatic’, where he questions the possibility of depicting the abject. Foster identifies two strands of abject art:

The first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow – to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation – to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right.

Foster further summarizes the historical origins of the idea of the abject as represented by Andre Breton and Georges Bataille as “Oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion.” While the artworld circumstances that led to this renewed interest in the affective potential of art and the focus on naughtiness and perversion are interesting, I understand this to be the misuse of Kristeva’s term as alluded to by Hollier. Rosalind Krauss writing in October in 1996, takes issue not with abject art but rather with the linking of the abject with the informe.

While these writers have taken up the term abject as a useful description of certain aspects of human experience of life and art, others find the concept itself problematic. Judith Butler, in her book Gender Trouble in particular criticises Kristeva’s work because it does not allow for variability. ‘Her naturalistic description of the maternal body effectively reifies motherhood and precludes an analysis of its cultural construction and variability.’ The lack of variability does not allow for the variety of experience or more specifically the variability of perception of experience. Although the experience of childbirth may, for the vast majority of mothers, be physically painful, the problematising of birth as traumatic suggests that existential realities are somehow unacceptable or wrong and should be otherwise. For some the pain is not denied but is seen as part of a process in which there is an ultimate gain, as in the concept of sacrifice discussed earlier, a gain which far outweighs the ‘loss’. Kristeva’s account of birth not

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6 ibid. p 115
7 "The idea of the informe (formless) can be traced to a variety of thinkers such as Augustine, Kant, and more recently, Jean Baudrillard, but is especially associated with the work of Georges Bataille. Bataille’s notion of informe suggests that it operates within different forms in such a way as to destabilise the organising principle of form. In this way informe counters the fetish of form and is defined more by what it does than what it is." (http://www.ucc.ie/french/informe.html)
only does not allow for the variety of physical experience but also for a range of interpretations, which can make that physical experience more or less containable. Pain does not exist in isolation, and the experience of pain is influenced by factors other than the direct cause of the pain such as the circumstances in which it is experienced. There are numerous examples of disaster survivors who report helping others only to discover when the immediate danger has passed that they have been injured themselves. They simply didn’t have time to feel in pain. Seeing birth as an extraordinary meeting, a revelation of a new life has a power, which can act as an analgesic for both mother and child.

Elizabeth Grosz also takes issue with Kristeva’s work in her essay The Body of Signification. Grosz identifies underdeveloped elements in Kristeva’s text and summarises these as a number of questions relating to the significance of the sexual specificity of a speaker.

If the body plays such a major if usually unrecognized role in the production (and deformation) of discourses, the specific contribution of sexually distinguished bodies need to make some difference in the kinds of discourse produced, and in the kinds of debt discourse owes to the corporeal and particularly to the maternal body.  

Bearing in mind the criticism of the Powers of Horror and the warnings offered by these writers I would like to revisit Kristeva’s essay on abjection and highlight those aspects which have been useful in my understanding of ephemeral art in general and specifically in relation to the work of Dadang Christanto and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsnook. I will focus on the phenomenological section of Kristeva’s essay about which I share some of the reservations of the above critics. Towards the end of his essay Foster arrives at an understanding of the abject that I find more insightful than seeing it simply as the desire to shock.

[A] special truth seems to reside in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or damaged bodies. To be sure, the violated body is often the evidentiary basis of important witnessing to truth, of necessary testimonials against power. 

The works that are the focus of my research are not horrifying or repulsive; there is no suggestion of perversion yet they incorporate an object/non-object, which according to Kristeva should be an acute experience of the abject – the corpse.

10 Much of the criticism and my reservation concerns Kristeva’s linking of the abject and the maternal body. However, as this element of her essay does not relate directly to my current subject I will not pursue that argument here.
11 Foster, H. op cit. p 123
There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.  

One of the predominant driving forces of western culture is the denial of death. In these circumstances an encounter with a corpse challenges millennia of sublimation. The corpse is the evidence of the unthinkable, and the complex social rules which govern such an encounter testify to the need to provide rigid guidelines for behaviour when thought must be suspended. If the abject cannot be assimilated then the presence of the corpse is an assault on our wellbeing, 'it is death infecting life'. When we are confronted by the body of someone we love, they are both with us and not with us. The body that we loved is there but we do not know it, it is now unfamiliar. In this corpse we are confronted with the ambiguity of the abject, neither object, our loved one, nor none-object, for the corpse that is them is also not them.

In the works of Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsook, we are confronted with death, not as a representation, which Kristeva tells us is comprehensible, but with the reality. "In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. . . corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live." And yet, through the tenderness of these works we are able to witness without repulsion. These works of grief allow us to work through abjection which is itself a process like the grief they represent. In contrast to the use of the abject in the art of the 1980s and '90s, the abject here is not a device but is central to the work, and offers the opportunity to witness as described by Foster. In these works the abject is performative, in that, if we open ourselves to them, they do not leave us unchanged, but rather than causing us to vomit it can be cathartic and ameliorative. There is a close relationship between these works and purification rituals which are traditionally employed as a defence the abject, however here the abject is assimilated rather than dispelled. To understand how these works could perform this function I will first look at the grieving process and the necessity of speaking to the dead, and the role of art in grieving.

As already mentioned grief can be the result of a loss that does not involve a death, but can be as a result of the loss of an ideal, a belief, even a fantasy. However, the most recognisable form of grief is that which is the result of bereavement. Grief is experienced emotionally and can encompass a very wide variety of feelings which might appear contradictory and can exist in the

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12 Kristevá op. cit. p 1  
13 ibid p 4  
14 ibid p 3
grieving person concurrently as well as consecutively. Though experienced by people throughout history, since Freud's work there has been an increasing understanding of the components and stages of mourning. The radical change in perspective it brings is reflected in Colin Murray Parkes' argument that grief is a mental illness.\(^{15}\) He qualifies this by elaborating a definition of mental illness that is far removed from the stereotypical view of 'madness'. He also argues that just because it is a natural and common process this does not disqualify it from being an illness as the common cold is both of these things. He describes grief as the 'price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.'\(^{16}\) This thought is not new but is echoed in literature from the Bible to Derrida, from Shakespeare's Sonnets to Auden. According to the model developed by Elizabeth Kubler Ross from her studies of people facing death, mourning their own prospective death, there are five stages of loss – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. A grieving person may experience all of these stages or just some and they do not necessarily follow a given order. This model is sometimes seen as over simplified and prescriptive, however I would suggest that these shortcomings arise more in the application of the model rather than with the theory itself. Regardless of this debate the Kubler Ross model provides a vocabulary for a process, which can be difficult to discuss by its very nature.\(^{17}\) Bowlby also offers a four-stage model of: shock and numbness, searching and yearning, disorientation and reorganization, and resolution.\(^{18}\) In the text, which forms the second section of this chapter, I describe experiences akin to these as mutism, searching, being lost, and a new world. I hope that this model will illuminate the text and that the text will evoke these stages.

Not only is grief experienced emotionally but it is also experienced physically. Elaine Scarry in The Body in Pain separates physical and psychological pain. However, I would suggest that physical pain has psychological consequences and psychological pain is experienced physically. When one says 'my heart is broken' it is not a metaphor or an attempt to give substance to something ineffable, rather a description of the physical sensation of grief. Numerous studies have shown the health consequences of grief.\(^{19}\) This is not to suggest that the pain of bereavement and the pain experienced in torture are identical experiences but that the mind and body are linked in pain as they are in other experiences. W Worden suggests that grief

\(^{15}\) Parkes, C. M. Bereavement: studies of grief in adult life. London: Tavistock 1986 p 24
\(^{16}\) ibid p 26
\(^{17}\) In the previous chapter I have already discussed the mutism that can accompany grief.
\(^{18}\) Bowlby J. "Processes of Mourning". International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 44

has four dimensions: feelings, physical sensations, cognitions, and behaviours. The cognitions and behaviours are particularly significant in relation to my research for it is through these that the two other dimension, feelings and physical sensations, are made manifest. Of the cognition and behaviour manifestations described by Worden those which I will focus on are: - sense of presence and hallucinations of the loved one, and, searching for and calling out to the loved one. Worden describes the universal aspect of the cognitive behaviour of 'searching': 'Whatever the society studied in whatever part of the world, there is an almost universal attempt to regain the lost loved object, and/or there is a belief in an afterlife where one can rejoin the loved one.'

He highlights that mourning is not a state but a process and emphasises that it is a task and that like all tasks there is effort involved. A mourner must complete this task for a successful resolution of mourning. In the works of Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsnook the process of mourning is reflected in the process involved in the making and viewing of the works and as such they can be viewed as griefwork.

In grief there is an element of irrationality, and this can been seen in the unreasonableness of some of the behaviour of the mourner, in the sense of presence and hallucinations, and, searching and calling out. Kristeva also refers to hallucinations as a reaction to facts that cannot be absorbed. 'On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.' The bereaved person often has a sense of unreality, a sense that the death could not possibility have happened and a denial of the facts. This denial can lead to the belief that the dead person will return hence the use of the term 'lost' rather than 'gone'. In loss, there is a possibility of being found. One of the behaviours which the bereaved sometimes perform has been described by Gorer as 'mummification'. This involves the bereaved person maintaining the belongings of the dead person in readiness for their return. Worden identifies a number of ways in which a mourner may try to avoid the pain of grieving. The mourner can deny the feeling, avoid all thoughts and feelings or to think only good thoughts in connection with the dead person, idealising them. The mourner may attempt to find a geographical cure for there loss and move restlessly from place to place. Finally the mourner may completely deny that the death has occurred and this result in a euphoric state in which the mourner believes the dead person to be still alive and with them. Both Worden and Bowlby suggest this is a short-lived state which quickly breaks down.

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21 Kristeva op cit p 2

Bowlby identifies the difficulty of carrying out research into bereavement as it would involve the study of a vulnerable group of people whose existing distress could be exacerbated by the process of research. Works of art like those which are the subject of this chapter offer us an opportunity to study grief without intrusion as they have intentionally been placed in the public domain. This does not mean that artists are immune from the possibility of intrusion into their private lives. John Lechte, argues that “[F]or Kristeva, as a psychoanalyst, there is no fundamental discontinuity between the production of a work of art and the life of an individual.” It would not be appropriate for me to make any assessment concerning the life of the artists under discussion given that unlike Kristeva I am not a psychoanalyst. For that reason I have confined myself to works where alongside the pieces we are given biographical information, which offers us a greater understanding of the works. I use the term ‘understanding’ with reservation because in all my initial encounters with these works, I saw them before reading the offered information, and in each case I was instinctively drawn to these works, and ‘understood’ them. Christanto encourages this multi-layered engagement with his work. While the works themselves have references to specific horrors both historical and ongoing he is conscious that the viewer brings their own experience of tragedy to the works and read the works through these experiences. Not only does this biographical information give an insight into the work it also gives permission to explore its personal origins. This permission allows a reading of the work that might otherwise be intrusive or presumptuous.

There is no evidence to suggest that artists feel the consequences of bereavement more acutely than any others but that they have a their disposal a means of expressing their grief that can communicate to others. Many people who are suffering some form of trauma benefit from expressing themselves through art e.g. art therapy, but this work is not generally in the public domain or intended for public display. The grief work of artists, however, is available for study and so can be accessed without artificially creating the circumstances whereby bereaved people can create art. Also some artists, because of the work they are engaged in, are more experienced than others in making the private public, and in the self examination that is involved in this process. They may have the facility at their disposal to express these emotions, which for many are difficult to articulate. In all of the writing I have looked at that deals with mourning, behavioural and philosophical changes are mentioned as one of the possible consequences of

23 Bowlby op cit p 13
24 Lechte, J. Julia Kristeva London: Routledge, 1990 p 24
25 The notion of understanding in relation to art will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter in relation to empathy.
bereavement. These changes are more easily tracked when there is a body of work to study – the anti and post bereavement work.

Gorer suggests we live in a society which does not provide sufficient support for people who are grieving. This inadequacy is evident for example in the attempts by individuals to create their own form of memorial as in the roadside memorials at the sites of road accidents, and in the outpouring of grief that followed the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The latter can be interpreted as disenfranchised grief on a large scale. Regardless of what one considers to be the impetus for this grief – either 'whipped' up by the popular press, large supermarket chains, or florists, there is no doubt that many of those who visited the gates of Kensington Palace or watched the funeral were in fact experiencing grief. While the debate surrounding this event focused on the inappropriateness of such large scale mourning, it ignored one of the basic facts of grief. The feelings associated with mourning can return at any stage in the life of the mourner and can be trigger by an unrelated event. This is particularly true in the case of unresolved grief. Rather than mourning an individual it could be argued that this outpouring was a manifestation of a society in which unresolved grief had become the norm rather than an exception and this incident provided a focus for the individual grief of thousands.

The very fact of the controversies surrounding the appropriateness of mass grieving for this death and of personal memorials in public places is evidence for Gorer’s argument that culturally we are adverse to mourning. Mass mourning at the funerals of public figures was prevalent in Victorians times, when tens of thousands of people attended the funeral of Queen Victorian. The arguments against personal memorials may be shrouded in various unrelated issues, such as environmental concerns and road safety issues, but they all are fundamentally objecting to public exhibition of the grief. The argument against the placing of flowers and objects at the site of road accidents is fraught with illogicality and illustrates the complexity and ferocity of peoples’ reaction to public displays of mourning. Gorer suggests that a society which, rather than providing ritual or other processes that help people work through grief, puts pressure on the bereaved to ‘recover’, is disallowing mourning. ‘Giving way to grief is stigmatized as

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26 For an indication of the debate surrounding private memorials in public places see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/4242576.stm and http://news.scotsman.com/aberdeen.cfm?id=1003352004 which gives a good overview. Also interestingly the placing of roadside memorials which began as an ad-hoc private ritual has become a commercial activity see http://www.nationalmemorialregistry.com/Disclaimer.html

27 http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/census/events/brtv1.htm

28 Newspaper references to roadside and mountain top memorials as 'junk' and 'litter'.
morbid, unhealthy, demoralizing. The proper action of a friend and well-wisher is felt to be
distraction of a mourner from his or her grief. 29

Recent research into the neuroscientific understanding of empathy and more particularly
our ability to ‘feel’ the pain of others might give us an insight into the multilayered response to
Christanto’s work and also the extreme reactions to the death of Princess Diana, of both the
mourners and of those who objected to this public display of grief. This research, carried out by
Christian Keysers does not focus specifically on a person’s response to an art object, although
they do use a scene from a film as an example, it can however help in the understanding of how
we react to the emotions we perceive in an art work. Interestingly, the same affective brain
circuit, the secondary somatosensory cortex, is activated when we feel pain and when we see
another person feel pain. This suggests that we can ‘feel’ the pain of another person. “we
understand the actions of others by activating our own neural representation of these actions.” 30
This is also true of sensations such as disgust and touch. The experiments carried out by Keyser et. al. focus on the sensation of touch, they used the example of seeing a spider on someone’s
skin and the sensation we feel of the spider crawling on our own skin, despite that fact that there
isn’t. This is particularly important in relation to the multilayered ‘understanding’ of Christanto
and Rajanearnsook’s work. These functions are automatic and preconscious.

Equipped with such a shared circuit for touch, when we witness touch, we do not just see
touch but also understand touch through an automatic link with our own experience of touch. 31
Keyser speculates that, given the evidence of this shared circuitry, the same can be said for
actions and emotions. 32 This thought is reinforced by Tania Singer and Ernst Fehr who state that
not only can we share the feelings of others but also we can do this in the absence of any direct
emotional stimulation to ourselves. 33 This suggests that we can feel the pain of others’ grief
without the causes of their grief involving us in any way. One of the concerns when making
claims for the affective power of an art works is that it may only be accessible to those who have
shared the experience. However, this research suggests otherwise, that it is possible to empathise
with a feeling that we have not experienced personally.

29 Gorer op cit p 30
30 Keysers, C. et al. ‘A touching sight : SII/PV Activation during the Observation and Experience of Touch’
Neuron 42, 2004 335-346. p 335
31 ibid
32 ibid
33 Fehr, E. and Tania Singer ‘The Neuroeconomics of Mind Reading and Empathy’ Neuroscientific foundation of
Economic decision-making. vol 95 no 2 pp 340 – 345 p 343
The second important element of this research is that the react is automatic and this may well explain the multilayered engagement with the work. First, we experience them empathetically and secondly on a conscious level when we read the information offered and intellectually relate them to our own life experiences and confirm our first immediate reaction to the work. The effective capacity of works of art may however result in the works not being seen at all, for they may provoke emotions that the viewer does not want to feel and rather than unconsciously understand the work the viewer is repulsed by the work. Equally, we develop sophisticated mechanism for avoiding reality, such as death denial discussed earlier, and works can trigger a denial reaction. This is alluded to by Bowlby in the statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Finally, we do not all have the same capacity for empathy.

In the absence of adequate mourning support, particularly in the form of 'ritual elders', could these works facilitate viewers to work through unresolved grief in their own lives? I would argue that not only can these works perform this function but that even discussing the works can also serve in this way. At every conference at which I have discussed ephemeral grief works I have been offered life experience by members of the audience who recognised this quality in the work and explicitly confirmed my thesis. These stories are not recorded or presenting as documentary evidence as they were offered as a spontaneous gift in response to my presentation; and the process of recording would be inappropriate and would change the nature of my relationship with the audience.\(^\text{34}\)

Dedication

Christian To For those: Who are poor, Who are suffering, Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe, Who are victims of injustice (1993)

\(^{34}\) This is a subject that I will pursue in further research.
The element of gift-giving in response to works is particularly evident in the audience participation in Christanto's *For those: Who are poor, Who are suffer(ing), Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe, Who are victims of injustice*, (1993) and *They Give Evidence* (1996–1997).

Christanto is aware of the possibility of his work performing the task of accommodating mourning, and the ability of art to have a healing effect both on the individual and on society. However, he is equally aware that an encounter with his work can be painful for viewers, and the possibility that it can reopen old wounds; Christanto provides an opportunity for the participation in the work to ameliorate these consequences. The text that accompanies the work invited the audience to participate -

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To overcome the immediate pain and potential conflict of this encounter, Christanto offers the audience an opportunity to enter the work by making an act of remembrance and consolation; to offer acknowledgements within the architecture of the artwork. Though undeniably a memorial to the victims of human violence, this installation also offers that essential space for a redemptive personal gesture.  

It is through this interaction between offering, invitation, and gift giving that the viewer is given an opportunity to work through their grief in response to these works. Without this generosity and sensitivity on the part of the artist and the exhibition gallery this work might just reawaken memories of pain and trauma, of the object, and leave the viewer there, without resolution.

This work is not displayed permanently but is exhibited regularly. Each time the objects, flowers and letters left by the public are disposed of, allowing the work to begin again each time it is exhibited. In response to my enquiries the curator Ruth Mc Dougall wrote:

The Queensland Art Gallery retains close contact with Dadang regarding the documentation of his work and in consultation with him; the ephemera left by visitors to the installation is not kept. The personal act of giving, not collecting is felt to be the focus of the work and as such the work invites visitors to respond anew, each time it is exhibited.  

The grieving behaviour described as searching is obvious and literal in the work of Dadang Christanto. Like the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Zoe Leonard these are a private process made public. The necessity to create a ritual is particularly pressing when there is no corpse – when the death has happened as the result of state sanctioned murder – e.g. victims of holocaust or “the disappeared.”

Dadang Christanto For those: Who are poor, Who are suffering, Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe, Who are victims of injustice, (1993). Showing letters and objects left by visitors to the gallery.

36 From email correspondence with Ruth Mc Dougall, Curatorial Assistant Queensland Gallery of Modern Art received 25/1/2006
37 Ibid
Like the untimely deaths experienced by AIDS sufferers and the deaths in Beslan these deaths are offending death, they affront our notion of ourselves as good, caring and incapable of terrible acts.

The need to mourn and the overwhelming need to have a corpse that is the focus of a mourning ritual is powerfully embodied in the work of Dadang Christanto, in particular his performance *Collecting Displaced Bones* (2005). The performance took place at the Australian National University, in the grounds of Canberra House. This work was performed by Christanto and his eight-year-old daughter; the age Christanto was when his father disappeared in 1965. In this work, Christanto’s daughter excavates the body of her father, echoing the relationship between Christanto and his father.

Christanto was born in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 1957 and now lives in Darwin, Australia. His work predominately deals with issues of human rights abuses especially those that took place in Java following the 1965 coup, which brought Suharto to power. During this period, members of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) and those who were considered sympathetic to their cause were systematically rounded up and massacred. Christanto had personal experience of these atrocities when his father disappeared. *Collecting Displaced Bones*, begins with two men wearing improvised cloth masks carrying a stretcher through a wooded area. They stop at intervals to rest and regain their strength, which is obviously flagging under the weight of the burden they are carrying. There isn’t a seating area provided nor is there any indication of where the audience should stand and so they follow like interlopers, unsure where they are going. Eventually the men stop in a clearing and carefully place the stretcher on the ground. On the stretcher there is a figure wrapped in cloth. Christanto’s eight-year-old daughter is in the clearing; initially she circles the body slowly and rhythmically and after a while begins to untie the cloth and to excavate the body of her father, which is covered in white chalk. This work powerfully highlights the ongoing nature of mourning. In terms of his daughter’s involvement it points to a group of disenfranchised mourners, those who mourn people they have never met, or violently deprived of the opportunity to meet. Mourning does not stop with those who have experienced the bereavement first hand but it can be passed on through generations.

Eventually the wrapped body raises from the stretcher and envelopes the child and carries her to a tree just beyond the circle created by the audience. The performance is over. As with the beginning, the positioning, and the duration, this performance is borderless. As an
audience member I am not given the usual clues but have to follow the performance literally. This adds an extra dimension of unease to the work. Occasionally, one could hear murmuring from the audience but rather than being a distraction form the event they articulated questions I am also asking, “Where are they going?” “Should we stand here?” Rather than sitting back and allowing the event to unfold, we must actually decide to follow, to be an interloper, to witness. These silent performers do not acknowledge our presence but we know that they need us for it is our role to be followers and witnesses and this is not a passive role but one we undertake by choice and having witnessed we are changed. Witnessing is a central element in Christanto’s work and through this witnessing we participate. Nicholas Davey in his discussion of the Aristotelian concept of *theoria* states “[T]heori emphasises the act of witness which (in the case of a festival or act of worship) contributes towards the emergence of the event participated in.”

Even the decision not to watch is participation; every reference to those who bear witness also refers to those who turned away, who decided to be blind to crime and injustice, to say nothing, not to get involved. As a signature on a legal document witnessing is a form of contract, it does not leave us without obligation. Here we are asked to witness the mourning, and the pain of others.

This may be the abject as truth as described by Foster; the ‘special truth [which] resides in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or damaged bodies.’ These performers unearth the evidence that is the violated body and they exist as the ‘important witnessing to truth, of necessary testimonials against power.’ We witness the consequences of power relationships, the evidence of abuses, which were enacted in the dark and forced silence on its victims. Christanto brings this evidence out into the cold sharp Australian winter sunshine. The absence of sound in this performance is striking and reflects Christanto’s preoccupation with the silence of those who suffer oppression. Although this refers to personal events it also addresses universal issues relating to abuses of power and the consequences for individuals who are victims are caught up in political events.

The participatory element in Christanto’s work takes a more sinister turn in the performance *Litsus*. This piece was performed as part of a exhibition, *Text Me, An Exploration of Body Language*, at the Sherman Gallery, Sydney, in 2005. In this work, Christanto and his son sit shrouded in black cloth while the audience fling flour filled ‘bombs’ at them. Considering both this work and *Collecting Displaced Bones* together a disturbing conversation arises.

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38 Davey, N. “Art and *Theoria*” op cit. p. 20
39 Foster op cit p 123
40 This silence is also referred to by Allison Gray in her article Dadango Christanto: a calling to account.
between the two works and the works of the audience. What is our role in witnessing and are we complicit in the acts of violence? In this work both the performer, Christanto and his son, and the performers that are the audience, become abject.

The abjection of the self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundation of its own being.\(^{41}\)

While Christanto’s work powerfully enacts the searching associated with mourning, the cognition and behaviour manifestations as described by Worden that I would like to focus on in relation to the works of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook are, the sense of presence and calling-out. However, I would first like to look at the circumstances surrounding exhibitions of works by Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsook. There is always a risk involved in discussing a work when one is not familiar with the artist’s culture, as there is in any form of ‘translation’, however based on the information offered by these artists and the permission given by the work itself. I will discuss the possibility that while these works contain specific cultural references they also address universal fears and desires.

Both Dadang Christanto and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook participated in The Asia Society’s exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, which was held in three venues in New York in 1996. The exhibition curator Apinan Poshyananda stated that the aim of the exhibition was to “reveal aspects of cultures in transition that may shift stereotypes and fixities of ‘Otherness.’” Alexandra Munroe addresses this issue in her review of the exhibition in *ArtForum*:

[The work in “Traditions/Tensions” deals less with the age-old specter of Western imperialism than with more immediate issues of cultural survival in the face of domestic tragedies including religious warfare, bloody civilian uprisings, the economic and sexual oppression of women in patriarchal societies, and the loss of traditional culture to nationalistic ideologies or capitalist consumption.\(^{42}\)

This exhibition was significant in that it was one of the first major presentations of contemporary Asian art in North America and it aimed to address some of the misconceptions of that art. It highlighted the outmodedness of conventional antimonies of East/West as well as traditional/modern by showing works that illustrated the slippage that occurs between these terms. Vishakha Desai, director of the Asia Society Galleries, stated that viewers looking for a

\(^{41}\) Kristeva op cit p 5

\(^{42}\) Munroe, A. “Contemporary art in Asia: Asia Society Art Exhibition” *ArtForum*, April, 1997
continuity of traditional forms would be disappointed along with those who simply viewed the works by the standards of International art world. In a radio interview the novelist Amos Oz who referring to the Palestinian Israeli conflict said ‘our dreams are all the same’. Not only are our dreams the same but so too are our fears, those horrors that haunt our waking. From the mother in the refugee camp who cuts up her identity photo and pins it to aid workers’ shirts in the hope her lost children will recognize the fragment and eventually locate her, to the child survivor of the Beslan massacre who draws detailed and elaborate pictures of her captors in order to ritually tear them up and burn them in an attempt to exorcise her horrors, there is a universal vocabulary of pain.44

The works of both Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsnook manage to transcend cultural specificity to address the universal without losing an identity that is fixed within their own cultures. So while at the same time using references that are steeped in the religious and cultural heritage of Indonesia and Thailand they both address issues which have significance beyond regional and cultural boundaries. In the text accompanying Christanto’s work in the Queensland Gallery of

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44 In a Guardian article written by Donald MacLeod Wednesday August 31, 2005 “For the survivors of the siege, especially the children, the trauma continues and there has been little in the way of psychological help, he said. ‘Many adults showed clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other conditions. The vast majority of people we spoke to had not come to terms with it psychologically,’” said Dr Cerwyn Moore, a lecturer at Nottingham Trent who has carried out research into the motivations that drive suicide bombers. (http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/news/story/0,,1559887,00.html)
Modern Art, there is a reference to his work reaching 'beyond the local', however I would suggest that rather than reaching beyond the local this work shows that there are circumstances in which these words, global/local, lose meaning. These works refer to a form of geography that is not defined by national boundaries, that ignores topography, that does not appear in any atlas but is an emotional geography that rather than dividing people binds them together.

In June 2005, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsnook and Montien Boonma exhibited at the Venice Biennale. The exhibition entitled *Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave*, curated by Luckana Kunavichayanont, Sutee Kunavichayanont, and Panya Vijnasanasarn, is an example of one of the main arguments of this dissertation - works made in response to untimely death and ambiguous loss are substantially different to works made in response to mortality awareness and in particular work made with the knowledge of the certainty of, or imminent death. It is not surprising that the choice of these two artists concerned with grief should come after the devastation of the Asian tsunami, and this exhibition contracts with the joyful celebratory spectacle that the Thai contingent offered in 2003. Their works incorporate very specific Thai references - architecture and literature, but the responses are universal. While the work of both artists is linked by their response to grief, the works demonstrate the different positions in relation to bereavement. Araya Rasdjarmrearnsnook (1953-) lost her mother, father, grandfather, and half-sister. Montien Boonma died of cancer in 2000 shortly after the death of his wife from the same disease.

When I first encountered Rasdjarmrearnsnook's work, I was very keen to include it in this research but it did not sit comfortably with my self-imposed definition of the ephemeral. I felt instinctively that it belonged in the group of works I was discussing however this instinct threatened the stability of my definition. The work *Reading for Corpses* (2002) is a video installation in which Rasdjarmrearnsnook reads *Inao*, a classical Thai love story told in verse, to unidentified covered bodies in a morgue.
The troubling aspect of this work from my point of view was that it was a video. While there are issues relating to the stability of new media works these are not ephemeral in the true sense of the word, the disappearance of the work is not an intrinsic element of the piece. However, on further investigation I discovered that Rasdjarmacrensook considers the video the documentation and the work exists in the action of reading to the dead – the original work, which is recalled by the video installation. Fortunately, this distinction affirmed my instinct and enabled me to include this work.

The works of Rasdjarmacrensook and Christiano have a site specific element in that they are often linked with a local sense of loss. In 2003 Rasdjarmacrensook exhibited Lament at the Tensta Art Gallery in Stockholm. On 11th September, the Swedish Foreign Minister, Anna Lindh, was murdered. A photo of Lindh stood in the entrance hall of the gallery adding to the poignancy of the works. One of the works exhibited was I am Living (2002). This video installation showed Rasdjarmacrensook placing brightly coloured clothes over the body of a dead girl. This could appear like a macabre form of dressing dolls, a horrific sight which could evoke the abject, however rather than revulsion this work offers tenderness and through this act of caring we can look.

Araya Rasdjarmacrensook Lament (2003)

Here we see evidence of the stage beyond abjection. Only at the very end of Kristeva's essay do we have any hope after abjection, the possibility of a 'rebirth against abject'. This work by Rasdjarmacrensook is evidence that a rebirth is not the only possibility but that love, caring and tenderness can allow a passage through to acceptance. Rebirth suggests a new start and for many
who are bereaved a rebirth would mean a complete loss of their loved one, they may wish not to 'get over' their bereavement as a form of fidelity to their loved one.

We find a place for what we lose.

Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else.

The work of preparing the death for their journey, like the task of nursing people into the world, is in many cultures the preserve of women. The clothes that the dead wear testify to the life they once had. The sterile setting of the morgue, and the cruelty of death rob these bodies of individuality, any memory of the life they once were. Rather than anonymous bodies Rasdjarearnsook returns ‘personality’ to them.

Rasdjarearnsook returns ‘personality’ to them.

Wind Princess White Bird (2002). Coming from a culture where the professionalisation and commercialisation of death is a relatively recent phenomenon I am not shocked by the tending of a corpse in the way that viewers coming from societies that had abdicated this task to strangers and professional. It is common now for most people in the UK to have no experience of bereavement until well into their middle age and even then to have no contact with the corpse.

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45 Freud, 1981 op cit p 386
The frankness with which Rasdjarmreasnook approaches her subjects in testimony to her lack of fear of death. Reading for Three Female Corpses (1997) and Reading for Nine Corpses (1998) in which Rasdjarmreasnook reads Inao to bodies in a morgue, echo the Thai tradition of young children reading to their grandparents, to give them comfort when they are bedridden.

In Barbara Campbell’s web-based durational performance 1001 nights the narrative of bereavement and searching appears on the introductory page of her web site. It reads:

In a faraway land a gentle man dies. His bride is bereft. She travels across continents looking for a reason to keep living.

Every night at sunset she is greeted by a stranger who gives her a story to heal her heart and continue with her journey.

She does so for 1001 nights.\(^45\)

The introduction also makes reference to keeping the ‘project alive’. Each day Campbell scans the press coverage of events in the Middle East and selects a word or phrase the has ‘generative potential’. She renders the phrase in watercolours and posts it on her site to act as a prompt for writers to submit stories.

The same evening at sunset Campbell performs a work based on the submitted stories live on the web. This process will continue for 1001 nights. When I first started following this work it was performed from Paris, since then Campbell has performed from various locations in Australia which means that the viewer must follow the sunset around the world to catch the performance. On the 11th June, Campbell will return to the northern hemisphere, broadcasting from Madrid, Granada and London. The link between the performer and Scheherazade may be obvious but it

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is no less powerful for this. Scheherazade told stories to save her life as the bereaved do. The telling of bereavement stories is part of the process of assimilating information that can be too difficult to believe. The narrator is not simply telling the story to others so that they may know but so that they themselves might be able to believe.

Barbara Campbell 1001 Nights (2005 -)

The book Scheherazade is set in the East, like the news stories which give rise to Campbell’s prompts. Speaking about book Scheherazade Campbell states, “The stories within will be set in ‘the East’ but you may never venture there yourself because this East exists in the kingdom of the fantastic that is called the imaginary. It is a land formed out of words and desires.” 47 Interestingly this performance also takes place in another land formed out of words and desires – on the internet. This land like the land inhabited by the bereaved is disconnected. In the face of the ultimate randomness of death, these works celebrate randomness, in the fragility of ephemeral materials, and, in the case of 1001 nights by the randomness of public participation.

In his foreword to the programme book that accompanied Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave Apinan Poshyananda states:

By questioning the function and validity of art in society, some Thai artists have explored the potential of contemporary art as a healing force for mental relief. Others have created work as a space of refuge, contemplation, and communication beyond death. 48

47 ibid
48 Quoted in Sukhsvasti, U. ‘Waking the Dead’ Bangkok Post, 6th May 2005
The works of both Christanto and Rasdjarmearnsook question the role of art in society, as a political tool, to draw attention to extraordinary atrocities that cannot be spoken about in other forms and the ordinary atrocity, death about which we avoid speaking. They offer a possibility of healing, and in the case of Christanto the possibility of forgiveness. *1001 Nights, In Memory* and *They Give Evidence* affords the viewer an opportunity to participate and through this participation, not only complete the acting works, but also create their own rituals. The responses to *They Give Evidence* and *Inmemory* are not literal responses about the work but because of the work. The slowed time of ephemerality offers the time of grief and gives permission to mourn in a time when we are encouraged to 'move on'. These works do not ask us to forget, to 'get over' pain but to accept it and to find a way of living with it. Returning to Mieke Bal’s discussion of the work of Andreas Serrano quoted in Chapter 3 and her evocative description of Serrano’s ability to transform the abject body, in these works we can also see this transformation. The abject dead body becomes a powerful monument, brought to life by the “...‘maternal love’ –the slowed-down look that grazes the object, caresses it, and surrounds it with care...”

This is not death infecting life, but death the inevitable consequence of living, and the pain that is the inevitable consequence of loving; this is what lies beyond abjection.

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49 Bal, Mieke. op cit
Sometimes death does not come suddenly but is a slow process of loss. The dying gradually lose those characteristics which define us as living – speech, sight, hearing, laughter, swallowing, digestion, excretion, wakefulness – until all that is left is the slightest neurological function that maintains the heart and lungs, just barely enough of those autonomic actions to sustain life. Despite the signs of extinguishing life, we hope for a recovery and when that is no longer possible, at least for a halting of the decay that progresses slowly towards death itself. At every increment of loss we beg for respite – what more can we cope with losing, allow us to keep this much, this much will do, this much life is enough. But, it does not halt, deaf and determined, the cancer grows, overpowering yet another vital nerve, another fine string connecting the brain to those organs we had taken for granted, the spleen, the pancreas, the liver, the kidneys. The moment of death is as slight as all those other moments, just one more electrical impulse fading. Yet, that one moment was the difference between all and nothingness, between hope and hopelessness. Here the threshold is infinitely fine – life and then death. Did we even see it or is it only known to us in hindsight when we can recall and say ‘that moment there – that was the last moment of life’. And the next, was that the moment of death or had we moved into a new form of time? Time now is not measured by change, for the dead remain fixed and unchanging. Is this the meaning of eternity? Now there is no chance of a reprieve, no possibility of remission, or of the longed-for plateau in the bleak decent into the abyss of dying.

In the insanity that follows there is no point in checking that there may have been a mistake, no need to look for a pulse, death is too final, completely sure of itself, it leaves no room for doubt. The old myths of redemption, of resurrection, provide no comfort and we must create another. Now we must find other stories to tell ourselves, new possibilities to hold on to. In the face of the confidence of death we attempt to create doubt, to create possibilities no matter how ludicrous. We press our lips to the stones in the graveyard but it is hard and cold. We curl up on the grave to be near them but it does not accommodate us. Instead, we find
consolation in the sea. We become obsessed with the ocean and those who have been lost at sea. We envy their mourners, they have possibilities, they have a dreamland of sunny islands and shipwrecks. This we know is not real but it will do. It is no more unreal than our hope of a cure and so it provides a focus, a way of communicating with the dead, a means of keeping them alive and of preparing for their return. We do not look at photographs because that would be about the past and memorialising. We want for a future for the dead, with us, so we dream awake of their survival on a distant shore. For months we make images of objects to send to those lost at sea – the things they may have neglected to take, not knowing that their journey was going to be a long one. We are mothers, we have responsibilities, we must remind people to wash their teeth, to eat well, to keep warm, to take their gloves and button up their coats. They will need fresh fruit, a hot water bottle, maps and directions. We think of all the things we forgot to teach them. They will need to know about the planets and how to navigate by the stars, they will need to learn to tie knots, make string, and make bricks to build houses. They will need to know about us, our culture, the things we have produced that exhibit those qualities of humans of which we are proud, lest they forget all this on that island where they have washed ashore. We will keep a place for them here for their return, we will talk about them so they know we haven’t forgotten them, we will remind ourselves what they look like so that we will not fail to recognise them when we open the door and they are there, wet and tired from their journey.

Others tell us “We are sorry for your loss”, and we are relieved that they are colluding with us that our loved ones may be found again. We have all agreed this is the best way to proceed, to delude ourselves with the help of kindness, which does not confront us with the truth. None says ‘don’t you remember the funeral? the coffin? the headstone?’ those landlocked solid reminders of the truth. But we arranged those things for others, to comfort them, to trick them into believing we would survive, to show we could perform the dignified rituals our culture demands, without shouting or raising our fist to the air and screaming ‘give them back’, ‘they are ours’, ‘we need them, you do not’. We protested with art, we read poems that said those things for us, which discreetly refuse to be dignified, to be accepting. For the poet can object passionately and then others can enjoy the transformed grief, the beauty of the language. But beauty was not what we intended – we wanted to give voice to our pain, our ugly untransformed grief. These poems are our language because they speak a truth that is too hard even to say and so we become mute except for rhymes, like Alzheimer’s sufferers who can remember only things learnt by heart. We too only had our learnt by heart information bill in the end it is of little use.

We know there is a limit to our comforting fantasy of loss and learn to keep it secret. After a time people start to speak of our lost ones in the past tense, they no longer write their
names on Christmas cards, in phone calls they do not send their love, they do not send birthday
cards or invitations to parties. The others know they are not coming back and hope that we do
too. But we do not give up, we stand on the shore and hear the water rushing over the pebbles,
clinking the little stones together before rushing out again and we wait and watch. Sometimes
we swim far out to sea to be near then. We stay in the water too long until we are exhausted.

It is not the dead who are lost, who are on a distant island, it is we who are lost, it is we
who have drowned and been washed up on the shore of a strange country. We do not recognise
this land and we feel numb. When we walk in cities we hold hands because we are afraid that
we will become more terribly lost. We are nervous crossing streets because the world has
become unreliable and strange, we do not know where we are going. The dead have no need of
knowing where they are but we are alive and adrift in a landscape of death where we feel
marked. We have been infected with death and the knowledge of fragility it has taught is. In
other places, they know this about us and are afraid of those who have witnessed death, who
have had it in their home, and they send them away until it has left them. We do not need to be
sent away for we have already left and we do not know if we will ever find our way back. We do
not know if we want to go back for there is a comfort in being lost. Being lost now is our form of
fidelity – without our dead ones we are lost and if we return to the world we may lose them
again, lose the possibility that being lost gives us, we may find them gone forever. When you are
lost you have a task, you leave breadcrumbs for others who may come this way, like other have
done for you. We remember having seen these signs but did not understand them. We start to
recognise others who are also in this world, their clothes are not torn, they do not wear a sign
openly but you can spot them and you nod to each other. You gesture ‘I know you’, ‘you are
here too’. It may be years before we speak, before we share our stories of being lost at sea and
washed up on this shore. We are surprised how the stories are the same, how we drowned and
sank to the depths and were cold and numb and slept a deep sleep where eyeless fish eat our
hearts in the dark and left us thin and hollow and didn’t dream for fear of recalling happiness
and waking to find it gone. Now we find pleasure in absence, because absence is all we have.
We are not part of the world of others with their lofty towers. These are pointless and foolish;
do they not know they will not save them? They think that by making them tall they will be able
to see them from afar when they are lost, but they are deluded. In our country the rules have
changed, it is not enduring monuments which help us find where we are. Instead we seek out the
fleeting, the transient. Even among the ancient stones of the Alhambra, we know that with our
feet, with our breath we are wearing it away. We fill our pockets with seeds and these give us
hope. We have vomited, we have cried, we have screamed in an attempt to expel the knowledge
we have learnt, but it will not leave us. Meaning has collapsed but we find new meaning in this place and the death holds no fear for us. 
For others the world is round but for us the world is flat and like explorers, we may fall off but we are not afraid.

Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra trafitto da un raggio di sole: ed è subito sera.

Each one stands alone at the heart of the earth, pierced by a ray of sunlight: and soon it is evening.

Salvatore Quasimodo
Conclusion

“The end is the beginning and yet you go on”

_Samuel Beckett_ Endgame

_**Untitled (Portrait of Dad)**_ by Felix Gonzalez Torres, _Strange Fruit (for David)_ by Zoe Leonard, _Reading for Corpses_ by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsnook, Dadang Christanto’s _Collecting Displaced Bones, 1001 Nights_ by Barbara Campbell and _my In Memory_ are all ephemeral works recounting and embodying a narrative of bereavement and mourning. Grasping the deep relationship between ephemerality, narrative, and mourning is crucial to the understanding of these works; form, content and feeling are seamlessly integrated. The propensity of the bereaved to tell their stories is well documented in theories of bereavement behaviour. The theory also recounts a shift in values of the bereaved, a greater awareness of vulnerability and interdependence – an awareness that is sometimes used to target the bereaved by unscrupulous charities: people are particularly likely to donate money in the period immediately following a bereavement. The ephemerality of these artworks reflects a similar value shift, from a devotion to creating enduring artworks, to a new appreciation of transience - something which has not been recognized in the art historical or art theory literature.

Gerald Prince’s description of narrative in ‘On Narratology (Past Present and Future)’ captures the unique quality of stories as ways of not just of communicating but of creating and sustaining meaning:

Narratology has made it clear that, while narrative can have any number of functions . . . there are some functions that it excels at or is unique in fulfilling. Narrative always . reports one or more changes of state . . . narrative is a particular mode of knowledge. It
does not simply record events; it constitutes and interprets them as meaningful parts of meaningful whole.\footnote{Prince, G. op cit p 129}

The narratives of the bereaved are an articulation of a value shift, of the changes of state referred to by Prince. They are a means of communicating this change to others. More importantly they are an attempt to inform the self, to 'make sense' of, and to find a new meaningful whole that can encompass these experiences.

It is unlikely that an individual could reach adulthood without experience of some form of bereavement, if not a death, then the loss of an ideal or the dreams or the aspirations of youth. Though we are protected by what has been called 'technologies of immortality', whether in the form of religion, ideology, art, or the succession of the generations, the forms of the narratives by which we live, teach us about the inevitability of death: they have a beginning, a middle and an end. We are born we live for four score years and ten and then we die, leaving children and perhaps grandchildren who live on to continue the pattern. When we speak of the death of an elderly parent we speak of the person as having had a 'good innings' or that they had a 'long run'. These deaths are seen as appropriate, albeit painful and they are part of the course of our life narratives through which we are reconciled to death. However, the deaths to which these works refer are a disruption of that narrative. In these premature deaths the dead person was deprived of the life promised by story of the generations. The bereaved in these circumstances must find a new narrative, some way to 'come to terms' with untimely death. This thesis demonstrates that in the case of this group of art works, the new narrative, the value shift required to attempt to find a new meaning, involves an engagement with transience.

As new narratives these works no longer follow the traditional format. We are not offered a beginning, middle, and end, but a neverendingness like the neverendingness of the mourning they embody. We are not offered a climatic moment, there is no denouement, just an obsessive present. These works have no sense of a future, reflecting the sensation of being unable to go on experienced in acute mourning. The bereaved live in a painful now, the past offering no comfort as it is a reminder of what has been lost, and the future, robbed of the potential that was the dead person, is unimaginable.

Nevertheless, the bereaved more often than not do go on. All of these artists made and exhibited works of art, just as Auden wrote and published the poem which states that "nothing now can ever come to any good".\footnote{Auden, W. H. op cit} Their works are proof of the will to live. However, the way
in which these artists continued to create despite the awfulness of their experiences, is a profoundly different form of communication. These are not immortal art objects but communicative acts. The use of the word ‘act’ as opposed to ‘object’ alludes to the performative element of these works. They are activities akin to rituals and the works themselves are acting in the way their physical state changes; they are acting out loss, pain and the attempt to discover new meaning.

The focus of the first half of this thesis on a precise and rigorous definition of ephemeral art was necessary because the artworld so often focuses on the object at the expense of the act. This avoidance of engagement with the act may be a refusal to engage with the powerful emotions embodied in these works, what Suttie called a taboo on tenderness. These works also threaten the propaganda role of art as enduring evidence of our existence. They deny the function of art as future monuments to ourselves and instead acknowledge that, faced with knowledge of loss, this attempt at immortality may well be experienced as meaningless. This acknowledgement of the failure of ‘high art’ to provide a consolation in the faced of a sense of the meaninglessness of life appears vividly in the work of Berryman who declares that he is bored by ‘great literature’ and ‘valiant art’. This is not the ordinary boredom of occasional aimlessness but the boredom that results from what Adam Phillips describes as the discovery “that one may not be leading a charmed life”, that in fact this is all there is. And yet Berryman, like Beckett who presents us with a glimpse of utter meaninglessness, continued to write. Ephemerality in art is both embodied pain and an engagement with the meaninglessness of immortal art but also paradoxical evidence of the powerful will to survive if only in this honest transient form. Despite the rejection of the myth of the immortality of art, the very act of speaking the unspeakable is part of the process of creating a new story within a new overall framework of meaning.

The interpretation of a particular kind of ephemeral art which I have presented here is not simply a matter of understanding them better: it has important practical implications. Attempts to conserve ephemeral works may well result in the loss of the very aspect that affords access to their deepest meanings. The resolution achieved in the case of Liz Magor’s Time and Mrs Tiber demonstrates the benefit to an art gallery when they work with the ephemerality and acknowledges that knowledge gained through engagement with transience may be worth the sacrifice of the desire for immortality.

Phillips, A. Kissing Tickling and Being Bored, op cit
Postscript

It is a requirement of any piece of academic writing that one arrives at a conclusion, but there are subjects that do not offer one. As Gorer demonstrated and as was obvious from the new rituals created by the bereaved at AIDS funerals, our bereavement behaviours change depending on the culture and the circumstance. Bereavement behaviours are adaptive and like the works discussed here, are transient. These works offer reflect the experience of bereavement at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. While they may not physically endure into the future the knowledge of these works can survive through other narratives. Mere documentation in the form of photographs and artefacts may not adequately capture the 'acting' works, but the experience of these works can be retained in the narratives of those who have experienced them. These works are content to live on in new narratives of experience and remembering, as the dead do in the minds of mourners who eschew the consolation of immortality.
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