

Power in the Discourse of Art: Ephemeral Arts as Counter-Monuments

Kuninori (Shoso) Shimbo, Monash University, Australia

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Abstract

This study investigates how transience is articulated in contemporary sculpture, in particular ephemeral art. In the art industry, ephemeral art does not generally enjoy the similar prestige as archived art partly due to the difficulties in preserving it. There is discussion that ephemeral art is often relegated to the post-structuralist descendent position, as opposed to being in the traditionally powerful ascendent position for archived art. However, such a relationship of power has been questioned in various discourses in contemporary art since ephemeral art provides contemporary artists with alternative visions and various possibilities. Especially with socio-cultural changes including the development of postcolonial consciousness and feminism, the role of monumental sculptures as effective carriers of memory and meaning in our time is disputed, whereas ephemeral art as anti-monument or counter-monument has been pointed out to be able to deconstruct traditional forms of monuments. Another strong contradiction to archived art is proposed by some artists who regard transience as a way of being. They generally investigate ephemerality as a central nature of their works. Their approaches often show an interesting proximity to the traditional Japanese aesthetics. This study shows that ephemeral art provides contemporary artists with alternative approaches and various possibilities.

Keywords: Installation, Ephemeral art, Anti-monument, Transience, Ikebana

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Introduction

This study investigated how transience is articulated in contemporary sculpture, specifically in ephemeral art. Some contemporary artists create ephemeral art, often in the form of installations that exist only for a short time, for hours, days or weeks. Their works are often made from non-permanent materials such as ice, food, paper or found natural materials (plants or rocks). Such ephemeral art changes form over time. Observing the effects of time on the materials is usually the essence of the artistic experience. While there are various forms in ephemeral art, they are in essence contrast to most archived art that is created with the notion of permanence or at least meant to last for a long time.

The issue of transience in ephemeral art was discussed in terms of its intricate relationship to archived art and this often underlies the debate of preserving ephemeral art. It is notable that surveying various attitudes of the artists toward preserving their art works often reveals their attitudes toward transiency. Some artists, on the other hand, do not seem to be interested in preserving their works. Nevertheless, whether they are conscious of it or not, their artistic investigation concedes the potentials of the ephemeral art as well as the limitations of the archived art under specific conditions.

This survey revealed not only the power relations between ephemeral art and archived art but also the fact that some artists show in their attitudes to transiency an intriguing proximity to the Japanese aesthetics of transience that is often discussed in Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement), a traditional native art form.

Research Questions

Although the following research questions led the investigation in this project, this paper as a preliminary study focuses on 1 to 3.

1. How transience is articulated in contemporary ephemeral art?
2. What are the possibilities of ephemeral art in contrast to the archived art?
3. Are there any common attitudes regarding transience between the contemporary ephemeral art and Ikebana?
4. Can Ikebana be effective in the context of contemporary art?
5. Can ephemeral art/Ikebana deal with the environmental issues effectively?

Preserving the Ephemeral Art

Ferriani (2013) pointed out the following five types of artists' views on preserving or re-installing ephemeral art. Those categories are not necessarily exhaustive nor clearly distinct from each other but are useful in considering the nature of ephemeral art in contrast to archived art.

1. Re-installation taking care that nothing be altered (i.e., Paul McCarthy, *Pig Island* 2010). The artists endeavour to re-install their works in the exactly same way often depending on documentarian such as photographs.
2. Re-installation as an opportunity to bring variations (i.e., John Bock, *Mien Gribbohm*, 1998). The artists in this category may have to face problems related to changes in the meaning of the work that might result.

3. Ephemeral materials to be repaired/replaced (i.e., Urs Fischer, *House of Bread*, 2004-5). As long as “the spirit of the work” remains, some artists accept repair and are willing to prepare instruction.
4. Ephemeral materials to undergo restoration treatment (i.e., Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit*, 1992-1997). *Strange Fruits* utilised the peeled skins of a number of fruits such as oranges and bananas. They were sewed back together to recreate their original shapes, incorporating buttons, zippers and plasters. Some of the pieces underwent chemical treatment to make long term conservation possible. But these works were rejected by the artist as they had lost their meaning (Serban, 2008).
5. Ephemerality as the essential nature of art work (i.e., Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991). Gonzales-Torres encourages the viewers to eat his work, a pile of sweets as he regards active participation from the viewers an irreplaceable part of the narrative. This work has no original concrete entity, but there is only one original certificate of authenticity.

In her conclusion, Ferriani (2013) states that “an understanding of the complexity of the interrelationships that come together to define the meaning of these new art forms has, over time, made it necessary to adopt different theoretical and methodological approaches” (Ferriani, 2013: 199). Although Ferriani (2013) didn’t specify what those new approaches could be, they need to capture the vast possibilities of ephemeral art.

More importantly, Ferriani’s typology suggests at least a couple of distinctive attitudes towards ephemerality or transience, although both of them articulate it as the essential nature of the works. While some artists like Felix Gonzales-Torres reinvent the meanings of transience under specific conditions, some artists like Zoe Leonard, just like some existentialists or Buddhists, recognise transience as a way of being, and express statements about the inevitable natural law. The former includes as the most distinguishing example the ephemeral art as counter-monument (Young, 1997). The latter shows some proximity to *Mujo*, the cycles of change, a fundamental factor in Japanese traditional aesthetics that is closely related to the perception of nature as transient.

Transient therefore Significant

In the art industry, ephemeral art does not generally enjoy similar prestige to archived art partly due to the difficulties in preserving it. Lord (2008) argues that ephemeral art is often relegated to the post-structuralist descendent position, as opposed to being in the traditionally powerful ascendent position for archived art.

However, such a relationship of power has been questioned in various discourses in contemporary art. A number of contemporary artists have shown that ephemeral art can deal with some issues more effectively than archived art, suggesting not just the limitation of archived art but also the possibility of reversing the presumed relationship. With socio-cultural changes in the post-modern periods, for instance, the role of monumental sculptures as effective carriers of memory and meaning is disputed. Ephemeral art, on the contrary, provides contemporary artists with diverse alternatives and possibilities. Distinctive examples of such works can be found in the discussion that ephemeral art as anti-monument or counter-monument is able to deconstruct traditional forms of monuments (Young, 1996/2003, 1997). In relation to German memorial to the Fascist era Young (1997) notes that for some artists neither literal nor

abstract links to the Holocaust would suffice. “Instead of seeking to capture the memory of events, therefore, they primarily recall their own remote relationship to events themselves, the great gulf of time between themselves and the Holocaust” (Young, 1997: 858). Young pays a particular attention to the proposal, “Blow Up the Brandenburger Tor” (1995) by Horst Hoheisel.

How better to remember a destroyed people than by a destroyed monument? Rather than commemorating the destruction of a people with yet another constructed edifice Hoheisel would mark destruction with destruction. Rather than filling in the void left by a murdered people with a positive form, the artist would carve out an empty space in Berlin by which to recall a now absent people. Rather than concretizing and thereby displacing the memory of Europe’s murdered Jews, the artist would open a place in the landscape to be filled with the memory of those who come to remember Europe’s murdered Jews (Young, 1997: 853).

If actualised, the work could have implied not just the possibilities of ephemera or transience, but also the powerful nature of emptiness or nothingness under certain contexts. Young observes a similar line of thought in “Monument against Fascism” (1986) by Jochen Gerz & Esther Shalves-Gerz.

Its aim was not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by passersby but to demand interaction, not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation, and not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to drop it at the town’s feet” (Young, 1997: 859).

“Monument against Fascism” (1986) as well as such a work as “Hiroshima Project” (1999) by Krzysztof Wodiczko show that not only transient nature of the works but also its disappearance can have powerful statements in specific cultural and historical sites. While the traditional function of monument is questioned, these works present new alternatives.

Transience as a Way of Being

Recognising the similarity of transience in contemporary ephemeral art to traditional Japanese aesthetics suggests an important point in considering the relevance of Ikebana, in particular contemporary Ikebana, in the international contemporary art world. While ephemeral art and Ikebana are distinctive forms of art with the separate social cultural-backgrounds, analysing their similarities may reveal the potential of Ikebana to be effective in the context of contemporary art.

Although little has been discussed, my studies proposed that there has been on-going and productive dialogue between Japanese Ikebana and contemporary art (Shimbo, 2013, 2015). Unlike some traditional Japanese art forms, Ikebana has been malleable and has developed with influences from external factors including new aesthetic attitudes and sociocultural changes. Since the beginning of the modern era, the Meiji restoration in 1868, the influence of the West has been the significant external force. It has been so strong that it appears today that the distinction between some current Ike-

bana work and the broader arena of contemporary art has become blurred (Singer 1994: 46).

While the transient nature of being has played a significant role in the aesthetic development of Ikebana as well as Japanese art in general for centuries (Heine, 1991), the term, process art rather than ephemeral art was first used in the late 1960s to refer to art made from ephemeral materials. Despite such a vast historical difference, Ikebana and contemporary ephemeral art face the same contemporary issues and share, for instance, a growing concern about the apparent degeneration of the environment. Many species on the earth are on the brink of extinction. Such awareness about the environment inevitably affects Ikebana artists' perception of nature that was perceived traditionally as transient on the surface but at its essence as permanent. In the following section several contemporary artists who are particularly of interest from Ikebana point of view were selected and their works are looked into in reference to Ikebana.

Nils-Udo (b.1937). In discussing the art of Nils-Udo, Besacier (Besacier and Nils 2002) presented the particular context of contemporary art in which the artist began his career in the 1960s. The new generation of artists “expunged the temptation of pretence from their works, and tried to return to simpler actions and forms” (Besacier 2002, 127). This was the decade of art movements as diverse as Minimalism and Arte Povera, and the beginnings of what subsequently has been termed Environmental Art. In respect of this latter movement, Besacier notes that walking, that is direct bodily contact with natural spaces, was regarded as a primary form of the aesthetic experience. Walking through natural environments, a symbolic intervention, (and recording this experience) plays an important part in the work of a number of other contemporary artists such as Hamish Fulton (b.1946), Richard Long (b.1945), David Nash (b.1945), Robert Smithson (1938 - 1973), Nancy Holt (b.1938), Carl André (b.1935) and John Wolseley (b.1938).

Nils-Udo's artistic activity shifted from painting to working directly in and with nature in the early 1970s, a move from representation to presentation. “Art comes from nature and eventually must return to it. Art is a mere transition between two natural phases” (Besacier 2002, 129). This is an idea that Nils-Udo often mentions in his statements and this has some commonality with Shinto attitudes. If “art” is replaced in Besacier's quote with human beings, the attitude thus expressed is a fundamental Shinto belief.

In working with materials such as plants or minerals, Nils-Udo focuses on their features that are so common that they often go unnoticed. In *Banana leaf, Bindweed flowers* (1990) he used the backs of flowers as the main focus and placed them on a large banana leaf, emphasising the flatness of the flowers and their white star shape patterns (Fig. 1). Then, he floated the arrangement on water, suggesting its lightness and fragility, and a metaphor for the larger natural world.

In this work there is no intention to prolong the life of the flowers by supplying them with water and this distinguishes this work from Ikebana. However, there are some similarities in the effect of Nils-Udo's approach.

The artist in fact alters our vision and stripping away the layers of habit that prevent us from seeing things as they really are. He thus induces us to go from a practical perception to a genuine aesthetic experience. (Besacier 2002, 142)

Finding new features in natural materials is an important part of Ikebana and some artists like Hiroshi intensified and extended them further. While presenting an unnoticed aspect of natural materials and focusing on primitive forms of aesthetic experience may be a simple aesthetic act, it can help people look again at nature. So it is understandable that Nils-Udo's works are discussed from environmental and educational points of view. Song quoted the following comments by the artist, "we must realise and accept our responsibility for the ecological problems that have been intensifying, and that a step toward this can be achieved through works of art" (Song 2010, 105).

Wolfgang Laib (b.1950). While using natural materials such as pollen, milk, wax or rice for his sculptural works, German artist, Wolfgang Laib takes a different approach to the issue of the ephemeral. Grundberg (2001) pointed out the similarities between Laib and Joseph Beuys (1921 - 1986) in the deployment of natural materials as metaphors for the human condition, a fondness for elemental forms and gestures, and the foregrounding of the artist's performative role (2001, 134). However, Grundberg noted that unlike Beuys' work, Laib's work is apolitical, ahistorical and impersonal. Rather than current issues, his works suggest that his concern is with eternal or at least prehistorical human encounters with the natural world. Visually simple and refined features of his works as well as their effects on the senses of smell, touch and taste provoke viewers into "a state of contemplation and stillness" (Grundberg 2001, 134). Bartelik compared *You Will Go Somewhere Else* (Fig. 2) to the interior of a cathedral, "transforming the gallery into a transcendent realm" (Bartelik 1996, 82).

Buttner (2005) further pointed out such features as creating a temporary space for ritual or transforming a receptacle for a potential point of departure for a mythical journey. She then concludes that Laib succeeds in "introducing the timeless gestures of religiosity into the heterogeneous yet indivisible unity of the work of art" (Buttner 2005, 86). Because his works are ephemeral, perhaps they are able to represent the opposite, the eternal, more effectively. As Bartelik noted, Laib's work reveals his strength in closing the gap "between the material and the spiritual, stillness and movement, internal and external space" (Bartelik 1996, 82).

Ikebana artists also attempt to express an attitude of the eternal through the use of transient materials. Ikebana's etymological origin helps to explain this concept. The prefix *Ike* comes from *Ikasu*, to make alive. Even though Ikebana artists use cut flowers (dying flowers), they attempt paradoxically to make these forms eternally alive through the ritual of their arranging. Flowers (and other plant materials) in Ikebana gain a metaphorical eternal life.

Another significant aspect of Laib's work is his affiliation with Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which has received cautious or even critical responses from critics.

The art world's increased multiculturalism of the last several decades brings up questions of what can be read formally in art and what must be known, and whether art can be a "universal" or even multicultural language.

Interpretations based only on viewers' contexts seem arrogant, yet absent

(without) catalogues, wall labels or advance research, viewers must rely on formal qualities. Fortunately, Laib's visual effects and consistent sensual interests carry across the cultural divide. (Koplos 2008, 167)

Grundberg (2001), on the other hand, criticised Laib's attempt to position his work outside the modernist tradition as "understandable but shortsighted", emphasising the rich history of Western art that includes a spiritual dimension. He also suggests an interpretation of Laib's organic pieces as "witty postmodern variations on the austere, metallic chic of Minimalism" (2001, 134). Whatever the justified criticism, it is hard to argue that Laib's work is not an unusual but essentially affirmative assertion of the continuing importance of nature to humanity.

Patrick Dougherty (b.1945). The art of Patrick Dougherty can be categorised roughly into three groups according to how natural materials are used in his works.

Abstract Forms. In this type of work the texture of cut tree branches is the central component. Masses of branches form balls in *Childhood Dreams* (2007) (Fig. 3), on the surface lines move inward, twining together, and others move outward. The lines of branches seem to represent the energy of life coming out of the earth, accumulating, forming and releasing. Suggesting the creation of mother earth, the work may also represent the balanced corroboration between man and natural materials. The artist respects the inherent qualities of his materials collaborating with them to reveal his inner world.

Irregular long holes on the side of the balls look like mouths, which may take in the energy from the wind. If *Childhood Dreams* is regarded as similar to an Ikebana work, these holes could symbolise voids that are often incorporated in Ikebana works. Voids in Ikebana are full of potential rather than being empty spaces.

Everyday Commodities, Pots etcetera. According to Dougherty, site-specificity, often the cultural context of the site, plays an important part in the choice of the forms he creates. Unusual largeness of familiar everyday objects defines the nature of many of his works. Unlike the large sculptures of Claes Oldenburg (b. 1992) the texture of these multiple tree branches gives an impression of a soft, not clearly defined, or dream like nature (Fig. 4).

Tree Houses, Huts, etcetera. Dougherty's primitive architectural forms such as his tree houses represent an interesting mixture of human and natural creation. The irregular structure of *Just Around the Corner* (2003) (Fig. 5) is reminiscent of tribal architecture and evokes a long history of human construction as a response to the basic and fundamental need for shelter.

Dougherty and Ikebana. Among the above three categories Dougherty's abstract works are closest to Ikebana installations. Dougherty's work neither explains nor illustrates nature, but it represents invisible natural energy using natural materials. While Hiroshi found line and flexibility in his substances of bamboo, Dougherty focuses on the functional propensity of young flexible branches to intertwine and tangle. Although there are many affinities between his works and Ikebana, my interview with Dougherty in November 2012 revealed that he did not know about any large scale Ikebana installations until he visited Japan in 1992. At the end of his half year stay, he

collaborated with a Japanese garden designer, Tsutomu Kasai. Muehlig described their work as representing “the joining of complementary sensibilities, one influenced by long tradition and culture in the respect and use of natural materials, the other by a contemporary interpretation of the primal instinct to build” (Muehlig 2009, 65). As to the influences of Ikebana on his work, Dougherty did not specify to me any direct, technical nor formative influences, but mentioned the idea of natural cycles that is related to Shinto philosophy. He likes the fact that his works are made of materials coming from nature and as time goes by they will disintegrate back into nature again.

Dougherty and Contemporary Art. In her attempt to position Dougherty’s work in the context of contemporary art, Muehlig compared his work with Jeff Koon’s *Puppy* (Muehlig 2009, 80). She noted that *Puppy*’s popular culture associations are matched by a legitimate art historical pedigree extending from Marcel Duchamp’s readymades to the “remade ready-mades” of Jasper Johns’ flag paintings and Claes Oldenburg’s huge sculptural renditions of household objects. Although Dougherty’s representational works do quote and “remake” everyday commodities, his approach is in essence different from Duchamp’s ready-mades, contemporary conceptualism and postmodern irony.

Muehlig concluded that his interests are primarily formal and process oriented rather than theoretical (Muehlig 2009, 80). Dougherty re-introduces us to the natural world through his elaborate but playful constructions.

Andy Goldsworthy (b.1956). Andy Goldsworthy is perhaps one of the best known contemporary artists working in collaboration with nature. In the 1980s, following the footsteps of David Nash and Nils-Udo, Goldsworthy started to produce site-specific sculptures and land art in natural or urban settings. Many of his works fit clearly into Gooding’s *creative collaborations* category and nature plays a significant role in his practice. Using various natural materials such as leaves, stones, wood, sand, clay, ice, and snow, he creates often ephemeral art objects with simple and archaic motifs such as lines, circles, holes, domes, balls and cairns. In some of his ephemeral works in the field, the effects on them of natural phenomena such as tide, sunlight, wind, weather, and time, are an important part of the work.

Goldsworthy often emphasises that his works will disintegrate into the natural environment in the future. Such an approach could present a simple but strong statement in terms of environmental issues. The transient nature of his works can be seen as a subtle criticism of consumption orientated societies that keep producing un-recyclable and often toxic wastes.

Goldsworthy believes everything in nature has the energy of its making contained within it (Fulford, 2007) and can transmit this energy into an art form. His respect for this energy and his perception of nature as transient is similar to traditional Japanese attitudes to nature, and some of Goldsworthy’s works do have visual qualities associated with Ikebana. However, there seems to exist within his works some subtle but fundamental differences at their core that distinguish them from Ikebana.

Ikebana is based on such traditional Japanese aesthetic as *Hakanashi*, *Mono no Aware*, and *Wabi*, and *Sabi*, which are in essence all related to the perception of nature as transient. Marra summarised their relationship with nature as follows.

. . . an aesthetic intuition of the phenomena of nature was responsible for opening the doors to the basic ingredients of the tragedy of life, such as the notions of time and change, rather than any particular philosophical system, Buddhism included. The metaphorical reading of the passing of the four seasons as a constant reminder of human mortality (*memento mori*) — as well as the tense relationship between the constancy of the natural laws that determine temporal progression and the cycles of change (*mujo*) that the seasons represent — are potent ingredients in the formation of the passive aesthetic experience of ennui. (Marra 1999, 118-9)

Goldsworthy's response to the natural world is more positive and engaging.

Nature goes beyond what is called countryside - everything comes from the earth. My work made indoors or with urban and industrial materials is an attempt to discover nature in these things also. It is more difficult to find nature in materials so far removed from their source, and I cannot go for long before I need to work with the earth direct - hand to earth. What is important to me is that at the heart of whatever I do are a growing understanding and a sharpening perception of the land. (Goldsworthy 1990)

In essence, therefore, many of his works are about human contact with nature rather than about nature itself. In creating *Sweet chestnut green horn* (1987), Goldsworthy used only natural materials, but puts them together imaginatively, utilizing the thorns to join each piece and create abstract forms, a circle and a horn shape (Fig. 6). This work reveals, rather than a second nature, the human mind working with natural materials, creating forms through their conscious selection and manipulation.

Conclusion

This study revealed the vast possibilities that ephemeral art can have in the post-modern period and suggested that the assumed power relations between ephemeral art as descendant and archived art as ascendant needs to be reconsidered under specific conditions. In creating ephemeral art some artists reinvest the meaning of transience to deconstruct the perceptions and functions of art in the dominant art world, while others show in their attitudes to transiency an intriguing proximity to the Japanese aesthetics of transience.

To conclude this study a couple of my ephemeral art works are presented here. It is hoped that some of the issues discussed in this study are addressed in these works. *Magical Tunnel* (2013) was commissioned by the city of Ballarat for their Christmas celebration (Fig.7). It is a ten meter long tunnel with the recycled Christmas decorations, segmented and reassembled on the outside and the solar lights inside.

As an Ikebana artist I work with line and colour to create my art works. I have been particularly interested in using artificial materials to create works of beauty over the past few years. Recycled materials also play a big part in my artistic investigation. I was excited to the request to recycle previous years' Christmas decorations with their bright colours and interesting shapes. In my investigation into the relationship be-

tween nature and art, I regard artificial materials as quasi organic materials. They are often more effective than natural materials in expressing my attitude to nature.

My work over the past five years in the field of sculpture combined with my many years training and experience in Ikebana give me a unique perspective that allows me to create an engaging work of art using the Christmas decorations, crossing the boundaries between decoration and art. I bring to my work an aesthetic based on my Japanese heritage and Ikebana training, but I also have my own personal experience of Christmas over my 30 years in Australia, both in the public and personal domain. Christmas in Japan is another influence that came to bear on my work for this project, allowing me to create a truly inclusive and innovative work with depth and texture on many levels. My background as an international contemporary Ikebana artist allowed me to interpret the theme of Christmas in a universal way, including but also moving beyond the Christian tradition.



Fig.7. *The Magical Tunnel*, 2013. Mixed medium. 220 X 1000 X 150. Installation for the city of Ballarat Christmas art project.

Heart (2015) was created for the Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show (MIFSG) (Fig.8). MIFGS is a popular annual event in Australia and it lasts for five days in March. I regard this event as an opportunity for creating large scale works (Rapaport,2011). I have enjoyed the challenge of combining artificial elements into my works, making use of their energy and colour. Milk crates were arranged to create the grid, which represents abstract artificiality that is contrast to the natural organic materials inside the crates. According to Krauss, the grid could have the mythic power to deal with the contradiction between materialism and spiritualism (1985).

As Jeff Koons showed in his *Hanging Heart* (1994-2006), the popular iconic image would produce various positive associations for many viewers and would be quite appropriate for this event. Rather than using flowers to create the heart form, I used mainly recycled cut branches to make a negative space. Outside the heart was filled



with fresh flowers and green berries to contrast the dry branches.

Fig.8. *Heart*, 2015. Milk crates, Pine cones, Branches, Chrysanthemums, Green berries. 210X280X40 cm. Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show 2015.

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