

Research Network “Ephemeral Epistemologies and Encounters”

deadline for submissions for first workshop: April 11, 2025

workshop date: October 27, 2025

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We are currently seeking contributions from the humanities and social sciences for a scientific network that explores ephemerality in both its material forms and theoretical conceptualizations. This interdisciplinary network aims to bring into dialogue various questions about ephemerality, specifically examining how different fleeting forms of expression are implicated in the continual making and unmaking of proximities, both human and non-human, producing “a matter of temporary intensities and pacts amongst people” and other entities (Vélez-Serna, 14).

Ephemera are commonly understood as texts, objects, and non-material artistic creations or practices of transitory nature, existing or serving their purpose for only brief periods. The fleetingness of reception and storage is ingrained to different degrees in forms ranging from metro tickets, notebooks, oral storytelling, and Snapchat messages to postcards, periodicals, and fanzines. By refocusing on the material-discursive emergence of this phenomenon, the network views the ephemeral as “not an object but an act of assemblage, a tactical making and unmaking of old and new formations” (Vélez-Serna, 12). This collaborative effort approaches ephemerality as a state of being constitutive of many artistic and everyday phenomena, encompassing its material forms – termed ephemera – not only as iterations of artistic creation but also as conglomerates of signifiers embedded within lived (but fleeting) practices. Ephemerality is examined as one of the main factors in how entities, including human and non-human actors, encounter each other and may produce senses of kinship and attachment.

The research collective seeks to investigate the affective intersections of temporality, memory, and the transmission of knowledge within ephemeral forms and practices. From graffiti and oral literature to digital content and body-based arts to self-destructing media, these fleeting expressions challenge conventional understandings of cultural permanence and preservation. By examining the dynamics of what is considered worth remembering or forgetting, this group aims to shed light on the cultural, political, and social implications of ephemeral epistemological practice. Its researchers explore how diverse ephemeral forms make and unmake relations, seeking to elucidate how fleeting (material) forms of narrative and knowledge impact affective proximities between agents, such as vulnerabilities or discourses of authenticity, through “intimate publics” (Berlant).

In scholarship, ephemera are often defined as “minor transient documents of everyday life” (Rickards, 7) that are lamented as escaping formal libraries, museums, or archives because they elude institutional record-keeping. Yet, they play a crucial role in shaping collective and individual epistemologies. In addition to the scholarly investigation of these media in transience, the network aims to discuss the a priori assumption that ephemera must be saved from their inevitable impermanence, rejecting the notion that fleeting literatures should be altered to fit into cultures of institutionalized collection. Instead, it seeks to learn from certain ephemera as assemblages that arise out of proximities that advocate for kinships of care and responsibility. How can practices and strategies of ephemerality, such as zine-making, pamphleteering, or oral storytelling, inspire a more inclusive and experimental approach to academic research? Adopting a critical approach to ephemera studies, the network challenges traditional academic structures by emphasizing care, collaboration, and accessibility in knowledge production, pondering new ways to think about distribution and shared authorship, resisting the often competitive, individualistic nature of academia (and of the humanities in particular).

The logics of archival collection are often tied to cultures of collecting that privilege certain media and data while excluding others. Seeing that knowledge production and institutionalization are inherently bound up in these ideological considerations, the network aims to proliferate debates about how ephemerality in indigenous literatures and alternative media creations elude the logic of hegemonic ways of preserving knowledge. These efforts include potential mechanisms for the decolonization of the archive (and the library). Rather than focusing on an ontology that seeks to examine an unchanging, permanent essence of being, the network’s “echology” (Muecke) aims to bring into view sets of interrelations (with and of people, animals, land, and other entities) based on coexistence. Our collective is thus also open to upset notions of ephemerality that are based on linear temporalities.

Literatures and knowledges may have varying degrees – or scales – of ephemerality, and this initiative seeks to assemble and investigate a wide range of ephemeral sources and scholarly interests surrounding the interdisciplinary field of ephemera studies, including literary and cultural studies, history and history of art, anthropology, sociology, museum studies, film studies, media studies, theatre studies, geography, philosophy, etc.

We welcome expressions of interest that consider questions including, but not limited to:

- How do (specific) ephemera and ephemerality become meaningful within various socio-cultural practices?
- What are ephemera and who decides?
- What practices of forgetting and cultures of collecting exist?
- How do ephemeral literatures and forms of knowledge production challenge traditional epistemologies and canons? In what ways do temporary forms of expression reflect or resist cultural and political power dynamics?

- How might a postcolonial/decolonial archive account for ephemerality? What can we learn from ephemeral epistemologies, such as the transience inherent in itinerant cultures (nomadology), for example?
- What kind of representations are conveyed through ephemera, and how is the ephemeral form related to its content?
- How are ephemera represented in and set in relation to conventionally published texts?
- What kind of epistemological infrastructures seek to collect these kinds of knowledges?
- How can we think transnationally and globally about record-keeping of ephemera?
- How might we question the ephemerality/permanence binary?
- What constitutes de-ephemeralization?
- (How) can academia incorporate the ethics associated with some ephemera, such as zines or oral literatures, into its research practices? What can academic institutions learn from the decentralized and accessible nature of the knowledge practices and networks surrounding these ephemera?
- What methodologies are best suited for studying ephemeral texts, objects or practices?
- How do digital technologies and social media influence the creation and dissemination of ephemeral knowledge?
- What role does memory play in the transmission of knowledge within communities that rely on ephemeral forms of expression?

Ephemeral objects and phenomena to be studied include but are not limited to: Broadsides, food, radio broadcasts, receipts, memes, podcasts, internet aesthetics/subcultures, pamphlets, posters, advertising, fragrances, sounds, atmospheres, oral poetry or storytelling, cinema screenings, festivals, exhibitions, fashion (trends), pop-up events, fleeting architectural spaces, performance arts, pop-up art galleries, and social media stories. This list is not exhaustive.

We are interested in synergizing our common research interests into a long-term network on ephemerality. If you are interested in our endeavour and would like to join a first hybrid 1-day workshop on **October 27, 2025** and contribute a 10-minute paper to our conversation, please send a brief abstract that outlines your project and expresses your interest (180-200 words including a title), and a short bio note to tanja.kapp@uni-tuebingen.de by **April 11, 2025**. Participation will be possible online and in-person in Tübingen. Early-career researchers are especially welcome!

We look forward to your contributions and to a lively exchange of ideas! If you have any questions, please get in touch.

Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Rickards, Maurice. *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1988.

Vélez-Serna, Maria. *Ephemeral Cinema Spaces: Stories of Reinvention, Resistance and Community*. Amerstam: UP, 2020.

Muecke, Stephen. “Echology: Field Philosophy and Indigenous Australia.” Hybrid Lecture, *Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences*, 29. 11. 2024.