

Cross-Fertilisations and Hybrid Forms

“La música de concierto, las estaciones culturales, la danza contemporánea y el ballet brillan por su ausencia en los repertorios estéticos de muchos reventados sectores. Los más cercanos a la vida cultural institucionalizada, buscan con lupa en estas ciudades imposibles, instalaciones efímeras, el teatro del cuerpo, o la danza-teatro, espectáculos multimedia y géneros fusión o de plano meusica medieval. Si el asunto suena medio exótico, mejor. Si no, mejor vivir los rituales de la catarsis futbolera, del rock de jaguares o de los hoyos más oscuros de las metrópolis.

“A estas alturas del campeonato es impensable un ser unidireccional o consumidor de un solo espacio o disciplina. Desde que se inventó el control remoto se acabó la fidelidad y se instaló el eclecticismo, la desconfianza y la evasión. Buscar coherencia en los hábitos culturales de los ciudadanos es tan utópico como inútil en un mundo de fragmentaciones” (Jiménez López 2002).

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I think the key point here is that artistic work is in continual evolution. One of the goals of the Curricular Interdisciplinary Program is to capture change and also be open to the impact of shifts in direction from within the artistic community.

Very broadly, the idea of interdisciplinarity denotes practises integrating the mediums and ideas of two or more disciplines. For me, this does not include multi- or pluri-disciplinary works when they are the result of the collaboration of several disciplinary artists —i.e. the simple addition of disciplinary practises.

Rather, I reserve the term interdisciplinary for hybrid practises that integrate elements borrowed from different disciplines, or for practises where the artist applies the notions of his or her original discipline (his or her own sense of form, familiarity with a material language, mastery of tools) in work that is more easily identifiable with another discipline. Therefore, I propose dividing interdisciplinary approaches into three cross-related categories:

Performance Art: a multi-dimensional artistic practise that involves the live presence of the artist in a temporal dimension, often in a critical and process-oriented context. Performance art is an artistic practise that has a recognisable tradition, history and community. Examples include body art, action art, site-specific performative installations, conceptual and improvisatory performances and one-person stand-up performances.

Interdisciplinary Work: an inclusive artistic practise that transcends and integrates discrete art forms where the resulting work is outside the framework of established disciplines. This interdisciplinary

dynamic can take place at a conceptual level (combining disciplinary ideas), at a procedural level (combining disciplinary methods) and/or at a formal level (combining disciplinary structures). Examples include non-linear theatre, multimedia dance and music, hybrid performances, and multidimensional installations.

New Artistic Practises: an open category for artistic practises that are non-discipline based and respond to concerns (formal, aesthetic, technical, etc.) other than those traditionally governing the production of artworks. Such practises often subvert established notions of what art is and open new territories for art, artists and their relationships with the public. This activity often takes place outside conventional art domains. New artistic practises may be found, for example, in science, ethnology, or ecology. Since the focus of these practises is often on process and thematic concerns, this category is open to projects that do not necessarily result in a recognizable art product in the traditional sense. Examples include politically engaged art, ritual-based practises, science/art collaborations, and public and community art.

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The strict boundaries between artistic disciplines have, in fact, dissipated so that our understanding of them have also changed: we have become interested in the spaces between the disciplines, fascinated by cross-fertilisations and hybrid forms which, for me, are the sources of diversity and creativity. The Curricular Interdisciplinary Program is the ground upon which we can receive, question and accommodate 'non-disciplinary' art practises that call upon a high degree of personal and social awareness, and propose new models in which to consider the age-old dichotomy of process and object.

The arts community, and in particular emerging artists and artists of non-western traditions, continue to express a strong interest in areas of art that do not fit comfortably into the standard categories of artistic discipline. The Curricular Interdisciplinary Program is committed to finding new and better ways to accommodate diversified forms of artistic expression: its mission is to support multiple, hybrid and

experimental approaches to the creation, research, production and dissemination of interdisciplinary and non-disciplinary artistic practises that display a critical and/or exploratory attitude.

The idea of interdisciplinarity in the arts does not refer solely to exchanges within artistic disciplines. Art itself, as a whole, can be seen as a discipline in an interdisciplinary relationship with other fields, such as education or the social sciences (anthropology, politics, sociology) and the pure and applied sciences. We also see a lot of exchanges between art and questions that are already interdisciplinary, such as feminism, spirituality, the environment, and political issues of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. The discourses on these subjects inspire many artists.

Ideas, political positions, and philosophical quests have historically prompted interdisciplinary experiments. Movements like Futurism or Dadaism, which were essentially political and philosophical stances, gathered artists from all disciplines. Transdisciplinary movements like these have facilitated interdisciplinary exchanges and projects. Nowadays, concerns like the environment, feminism, in fact all political questions, have manifested themselves in the arts in a transdisciplinary way. Artists interested in these questions tend to look for the best ways to actualise them in their practise, often finding themselves exploring and integrating into their practise other mediums than those of their original discipline. When interdisciplinary frameworks are unavailable, we find these artists in the versatile circuits of the visual arts, conceptual art and performance art.

A large proportion of the practises currently classified under the interdisciplinary heading are in fact non-disciplinary practises: strangers to the very notion of discipline, they are outside a disciplinary paradigm. In these practises, disciplinary concerns (advancing the disciplinary language, developing the mastery of a discipline) come well after other concerns —usually of a political nature— and these are the practises that institutions have the most trouble with because they tend to see everything from a disciplinary perspective. This is the case especially of practises of non Western origin in general (storytelling, for example, or arts associated with spiritual practises, related to rites or shamanism), artistic practises from

cultures where disciplinary divisions are non-existent, or at least different from those of the dominant Western division.

The Brain: Contingent Interconnected Associations

In any contemporary field of endeavour, whether politics, science, ecology, health or economics, there is a reawakened recognition that an interdisciplinary methodology is the best approach for gaining an understanding of our interrelated world.

Today, “with hypertext, the textual (or informative) material can be interconnected in such a way that the vast system of relations breaks the linear reading, permitting manipulation of information in a manner more congruent with how the brain works associatively. [...Ted] Nelson, [Vannevar] Bush, and [Douglas] Engelbart [—artists instrumental in understanding the so-called ‘electronic-information revolution’—] all based their inventions on the idea that the human mind does not work in a linearly hierarchised manner, but rather by contingent interconnected associations. To go where one wants and at the level one wants, beginning in the middle or the end, and ending with the beginning, that is the great contribution of hypertext, a spatial-temporal rupture that widens syntax and synaesthetically deconstructs meaning” (Toledo 2001). Is it any surprise, then, that in these times of continually shifting ground, so much of our culture is now placing emphasis on interdisciplinary methodologies and ways of thinking?

Historically, the visual arts or fine arts have been the most open to interdisciplinary practise. It can be argued that the subdivision of artworks into strict disciplines, the development of artistic media as self-conscious and self-sufficient pursuits was an outgrowth of 19th century European aesthetics. This disciplinary ideology matured in the 1950s with the modernist movement, only to be deconstructed by the post-modernists in the 1980s and further modulated by hybridisation in the late 1990s.

In the 20th century, western artists have been leaders in exploring interdisciplinarity and its relationship with technology. Mexico also has a dynamic history in performance art, which began its intense

development in the 1970s from its roots in the experimental visual arts. With the development of performance art came a fresh interest in all forms of multidisciplinary and non-disciplinary artistic expression.

Today, the performance art, interdisciplinary work and new artistic practise communities are relatively small and somewhat transient. Some artists experiment briefly, then return to their disciplinary practise, while others make it their area of concentration. These communities include artists of all ages and backgrounds.

The Institution as Incubator of Innovation and Experimentation

The vast majority of interdisciplinary departments in universities are affiliated with the faculty of fine arts. The concept of multi-media, already accepted, has been considerably expanded to now include all material practises, rather than simply 'visual' practises. Conceptual art as well arose from questioning formal and theoretical notions in the fine arts, and is a profoundly interdisciplinary art movement. Galleries, offering open or multipurpose spaces, are favoured venues to present interdisciplinary work. Eloquent examples are performance art and conceptual art. There is also sound poetry and sound art: artists working in these areas identify more with the visual arts, even though the obvious discipline would be literature for the former, music for the latter. These works are often presented in alternative galleries.

It should be noted that disciplinary innovation is often of a 'formal' nature, since the disciplines are defined primarily in terms of form. In the 20th century, we have become accustomed to interpreting as innovative what is 'formally' new. We often think, also, in terms of technological innovation which only touches on a fraction of what is actually innovative. Interdisciplinary or nondisciplinary practises innovate on other levels too: at the level of audience construction, notably, and artistic intervention in contexts not traditionally reserved for art, the exploration of new content, and relationships between art and other constituents of society, questioning the role of the artist as an agent of social change. The artistic field

itself has also been expanding for decades, where practises considered initially as non-artistic are being hailed as artistic practises in their own right (ritual practises, for example, land art, textile arts, etc.).

Interdisciplinary experiments are a very large source of innovation in the disciplines. Disciplinary artists who want to innovate often do so by bringing new mediums and new procedures into their discipline. If their work is acknowledged and taken up by others, then the discipline itself is transformed and its tradition is enriched. But before they are accepted and become an integral part of the disciplinary tradition, these works develop within the interdisciplinary sphere. New disciplines, also, are created and new art forms developed in the interdisciplinary field. This is the case with performance art, which is in the process of becoming a new discipline, as well as with the media arts, which are a new art form. Some institutions have already set up programs or departments for them, while others still leave them in their interdisciplinary program. Where there is no interdisciplinary program, these forms are either excluded from the institution, or they find a home with disciplines that are willing to provide one.

Priorities

Since the boundaries of the disciplines are relatively well defined, art students tend to gravitate toward the studios of their discipline of origin, even for innovative and/or risky projects, and even in the face of a lot of rejections. This forces them to translate into a disciplinary language projects that are, rather, nondisciplinary both in their intent and their strategies. To correct this situation, two things must be done: first of all, we must support innovation in the disciplines themselves to make room for these projects, and next, we must create an interdisciplinary program whose lines are well defined, one that sends a clear message to the artists concerning the will of the institution to support their kind of practise, along with the criteria that will prevail in the assessment of their projects.

Building upon the framework and mission of the Curricular Interdisciplinary Program, I would propose the following priority areas for development:

Boundaries – That the Program continue to collaborate with the disciplinary sections at all schools in the National Centre for the Arts to increase support for interdisciplinary and emerging art practises.

Exploration – That the Program encourage the exploration of new roles for artists, new purposes for art and new definitions of art.

Research – That the Program encourage research and critical discourse in performance art, interdisciplinary work and new artistic practises.

Growth – That support for the Program increase in accordance with the strategic priorities of the National Centre for the Arts.

Communication – That the Program support the development of mechanisms for on-going consultation, communication and collaboration with the artistic community and with strategic regional, national and international institutional partners.

Profile – That the Program develop strategies and projects to reach new audiences and enhance the profile of performance art, interdisciplinary work and new artistic practises, on a national and international level.

Recognising Transition Zones

The present system of cross-fertilising performance art and interdisciplinary work to produce one unit of activity has proven to be healthy and fruitful, and should be sustained.

The nature and thrust of performance art and interdisciplinary practises are to seek the blurring of boundaries and thus stubbornly resist definition of themselves, or of traditional definitions of art. As a result, 'fixed' definitions or permanent categories for these practises are undesirable. Rather, the approach is to create flexible frameworks in which these multilayered artistic practises can be recognised and evolve in a dynamic and changing relationship with the established disciplines.

Contemporary artists in general, and visual and media artists in particular, are constantly shifting, mixing and questioning conventions, concepts, procedures and structures. "Artists rarely agree on any single

definition: they tend rather to think in terms of materials, media and contexts, continually seeking the best materials and formal strategies for carrying out their intentions" (Boutet 1996). In this sense, the Curricular Interdisciplinary Program is both a transition zone towards expansion of disciplinary boundaries and a harbour for emerging and experimental interdisciplinary artistic practises.

Artists working in performance art, interdisciplinary work and new artistic practises are not interested in being assigned a label or handed definitions. They form a loosely knit community of highly skilled, resourceful and often visionary artists who have much to offer our collective cultural ecology. These artists have made modest but firm requests to be recognised and appreciated for what they are.

As a result, given the eclecticism of performance art, the hybridity of interdisciplinary work and the non-disciplinary approach of new artistic practises, all three are best served within the flexible framework of the Curricular Interdisciplinary Program.

Conclusion

Many questions arose during the evaluation of the Curricular Interdisciplinary Program and this round-table discussion is really only the beginning of an on-going process of 'capturing change' and reflection about these lively, vital and often doggedly undefinable artistic practises. The evaluation was sustained by a healthy infusion of collective interdisciplinary energy, and serves as an important step towards acknowledging and understanding some of the key issues that are of concern not only to performance artists and interdisciplinary artists, but to all artists in all disciplines.

References

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