

The Elusive Chimera: Interdisciplinarity

By Andrea Liu

Working at the cusp of two fields, as both a visual art and dance critic, I am made pretty aware on a daily basis of how rare, if not seemingly impossible, true “interdisciplinarity” between different art fields is actually fostered. Interdisciplinarity is often championed or marketed with a watery feel-good kum bah yah spirit by different venues or organizations, eliding the serious impediments to actually fostering real interdisciplinarity between art fields. If we define “interdisciplinarity” as merely the edges of fields touching, such as a choreographer using a visual artist to do scenery, or different disciplines being placed side by side one another in a “salad bowl” mix, such as a multi-disciplinary performance space, then perhaps “interdisciplinarity” is not rare. However, if we define “interdisciplinarity” as the historical trajectory and the canons of different art fields interpenetrating and cross pollinating, sharing affinities in their conceptual or aesthetic predilections, if not their notions of form, intermixing the texture of their social communities, then interdisciplinarity it seems to me is rare. If I took all my dance friends to one visual art event a week and all my visual art friends to one dance event a week, it wouldn’t change any thing. It’s a mentality, a tribalist, perhaps even territorialist identity that coagulates and exercise a centrifugal pull on its members. It’s an internal motivation problem as well: it takes alot of time to learn about another discipline, and it doesn’t benefit your career or fortify your ego in any way to do so, and you have to endure the humiliation of being a novice or beginner for awhile. As such most artists don’t bother.

Ironically I have seen artists spend more time learning about politics and political history, designating that as worthy of their time; meanwhile the notion of learning about another art discipline other than their own is beyond the pale of anything they can imagine. Often the more rarefied and prestigious the institutional context, the more ossified the imperviousness to learning about other disciplines; as professional egos have been more tightly sedimented and entrenched in that one discipline. The more high profile the context, the more protective, perhaps even chauvinist, the impulse to seal its boundaries from outside contaminants. It has gotten to the point where I wonder, maybe we don’t need interdisciplinarity. Maybe there is a good reason different art fields are balkanized and myopically tunnel-vision specialized and ignore each other, and we should keep it that way.

As such, the majority of my visual art friends have astoundingly outdated, painfully meretricious, and cliché notions of dance (that dance is primarily ballet, that dance must always be to music), and my dance friends conversely have the most gauche and 4H High School amateur ideas about visual art (that versimilitude in representation, illusionism or the mastery of Renaissance perspective is the highest, most advanced measure of an artist’s skill)—both classicist, virtuoso-oriented, hierarchical mastery-oriented misconceptions of what those fields are which are breathtaking given the degree to which they are oblivious to some rudimentary basics of the contemporary concerns of those fields.

As with anything that matters in cultural production, politics, and society, the only exception I can think of in the U.S. was in the 60’s. The only significant historical anomaly I know of where substantive cross-pollination and interpenetration between different art fields was

achieved was Black Mountain College with Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenburg, Rainer, Ono, etc. Although Black Mountain ran from the 30's to the 50's, many of the transformations in art that Black Mountain catalyzed (in visual art and dance) did not become canonized or attain a generalized cultural level until the 60's: the entry of the quotidian; the fostering of a democratic relationship between viewer and audience; the challenging of the aesthetics of frontality and frontal presentation; the impact of minimalism and its anti-form ideology (on dance and visual art); the tectonic shift in the cultural capital of art being derived from virtuoso and skill, to, instead, conceptual experimentation; and a shift from subjective personal expression to an avante garde structural revamping of mediums.

Fast-forwarding to today, perhaps examples such as Portland Institute of Contemporary Art's Time Based Arts Festival (a direct pipeline for the below-14th-street downtown NY arts scene), Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and downtown venues like the Kitchen, Location One, Chez Bushwick, achieve a salad bowl interdisciplinarity and suspend the barriers for a bit. Now, whether such "interdisciplinary" venues are truly changing the ecology of the arts world and rendering interdisciplinarity more acceptable, more popular, or whatever, I do not know. As soon as you leave these atypical enclaves you are pretty much assaulted on all sides by a territorialist, insular quasi-jingoism within each art field. PICA's TBA may achieve a temporary "interdisciplinary" audience for 14 days (i.e. one that is open to seeing different disciplines, that is not going to reject seeing disciplines other than their own)—but the real question is do any of the artists performing there (or in the audience), by being exposed to disciplines other their own, start to integrate or even invest in learning in art fields other their own? I seriously doubt it. You may be at an "interdisciplinary" festival for 14 days, but as soon as that festival is over you go back into your social network, community, and coagulated mentality around your particular art field.

Another exception to this rule may be a university like UC Santa Cruz that prides itself on cross-disciplinary, avante garde arts education, and pays little heed to traditional discipline boundaries. Again though, UC Santa Cruz is an anomaly. Here is a city that has a two term socialist-feminist mayor, that holds National Marijuana day where people openly smoke marijuana in front of policemen, and whose rise as a university is heavily entrenched in the history of the counterculture of the 60's. Santa Cruz, CA and Portland, Oregon being hippie towns, they are fecund breeding grounds for interdisciplinarity. So I guess the conclusion we can draw is it takes a countercultural hippie environment for interdisciplinarity to thrive.

One last exception, with the 60's being the impetus once again, is NYU's Performance Studies department (started in the 60's by Richard Shreckner). This is a field combining anthropology, cultural studies, art, drama, music, dance, theater, architecture and deeply ensconced in post-structuralist theory and leftist politics. Here, however, the Performance Studies department surpasses any discussion we are having here, as they are not interdisciplinary, but anti or post disciplinary, which is another level of evolution altogether.

Therefore, we have 5 levels of evolution:

1. cross-disciplinary: spanning different disciplines
2. multi-disciplinary: putting many art disciplines side by side in a salad-bowl fashion, not necessarily integrating them

3. interdisciplinary: combining things from different disciplines, whether superficially or not
4. post-disciplinary: coming from an ideology that doesn't acknowledge the difference between disciplines
5. anti-disciplinary: coming from an ideology that destroys the boundaries between disciplines

Of course I can hear the rejoinder already: "It's not our fault we only care about our field—that's how funding works! It is all the funders fault! Funders split us up by discipline so that is how we have to operate!" This is total hogwash. Funders do not stop you from, on a Tuesday night when you have an extra two hours, picking up a book and educating yourself and reading about another discipline. Funding doesn't stop you from, when you go to conservatory that has multiple arts disciplines of a high caliber side by side, like Cal Arts or Purchase, or somewhere like Bard or Hampshire that has an immersive art culture, learning about the other arts in your school. It is so hackneyed for people to attribute their provinciality to funding, as evidenced by the fact that these blinders put up against other art disciplines are in place already before people have come within 5 football fields proximity of even thinking about funding, when they are still undergrads. Is funding what makes you think one discipline is less valuable than another? That is a learned, socialized mentality that goes deeper than funding.

Of course, some celebrity curator with moussed hair and connections for 25 years in the arts world, cutting the pink ribbon over champagne glasses at the opening of his multidisciplinary arts space, can give a glistening feel-good speech about how the opening of his/her space proves the triumph of multidisciplinary-ism, or "interdisciplinary arts". But for those of us on the ground, for those of in the nitty gritty of real artists' lives (i.e. dancers and visual artists), we know that is cosmetic white-washing. We know we have to split off ourselves into fractured multiple selves if we want to invest in more than one arts, with each self having non-overlapping personal histories, credentials, and contacts, because each field is so insular and inner-directed, and shares absolutely no tools, no perspectives, no points of reference in common (despite commonalities existing).

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Nowhere did the feat of interdisciplinarity become more apparent, ironically, than at my three week "interdisciplinary" residency at the Atlantic Center in July 2007. Ostensibly an artist residency designed to support and promote "interdisciplinary" practices with writers, visual artists, and musicians during my stay, paradoxically the experience underscored how ossified and balkanized different art fields are. This was truly a "salad bowl" situation where three different art disciplines were put together in a summer camp-like situation of sharing dining halls, computer rooms, libraries, dormitories, but socialized separately, ate meals separately, formed trust, bonds and social contacts according to disciplinary-defined parameters; so much that when one day I decided to sit at the musician's table rather than the writers table, my fellow writer resident began jeering, "Andrea is trying to infiltrate the Musician's table." When one of my fellow writer resident discovered I went to a party held by the Master Artist Musician, she rebuked me for being "so ballsy as to crash the Musician's party." It was so ironic to me that the promotional materials of this residency trumpeted the notion that this was an "interdisciplinary residency;" and yet, faced with the reality of the residency, simply by attending a party held by artists in a discipline other than own I was transgressing some social

boundary. It made apparent to me that merely putting different fields in close physical proximity of one another does little to overcome the internal mental resistance of different art fields listening to each other speak without preconception, much less becoming porous to each others' influence.

Most strange was the subtle but persistent derision, befuddlement, and veiled hostility of resident artists towards the music of electroacoustic (EAM) musician residents, such as Suk-Jun Kim, Damian O'Riain, Jason Bolte and Yutaka Makino, led by distinguished British EAM guru Dennis Smalley. For instance, many playwrights in my writers group, coming from a more meretricious commercial/ musical theater entertainment-oriented backgrounds, believing in mimetic "representation" as the ultimate goal of art, conservative "storytelling" narrative structure, and humanist clichés of art's purpose leading to beauty and truth, found the work of the electroacoustic musicians to be antithetical to their notion of "music".

The more experimental electroacoustic musicians eschewed any Western concert notions of rhythm, melody, time signature, notation, and intonation, and instead were like blotches, sea waves, or inundations of densely evocative and broodingly intense sound, buttressed by an armature of post-structuralist theory. One of the writers said to me at an EAM performance, while picking her skin and clearly uncomfortable, "this music is really hard to get on the inside of." Instead of taking this perfect three week opportunity to challenge or question their assumptions about this uncompromisingly inchoate, conceptual and resolutely non-commercial non crowd-pleasing music, the playwrights in my group only enacted dismissive stereotypes (shared to some degree by even the staff) of EAM musicians being "inaccessible" and this constant questioning of EAM musicians as to "who is their audience?" (as if to imply they have none, or would be hard pressed to find one--as well as more blatantly condescending questions like, "Do you believe in rhythm?") Ironically accusing EAM, as both a social group and a music form, of being "insular", in fact it was actually their own insularity, their self-satisfied conformity and lack of openness to a type of music that flung off the constraints of Western ideologies of music, that was the cause of their displeasure. Simply trying to organize a panel discussion of EAM musicians moderated by a writer, myself, a quasi-collaboration across disciplines that is routinely taken for granted in the Movement Research/Chez Bushwick/Kitchen downtown arts environment of New York, necessitated legions of justifications, advocacy, and convincing, met with resistance, suspicion, and skepticism by other artists at the Atlantic Center, much to my utter astonishment.

I can say with sureness that I was the only person amongst 25 for whom my residency was primarily an interdisciplinary experience—for whom the most significant interface, exposure, and aftereffect of my time was my exposure to a discipline other than my own. And yet, rather than this fulfilling the vision of what ACA's purpose was supposed to be, this rendered me some type of inexplicable anomaly.

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Speaking specifically of visual art and dance, I will enumerate what I think are some serious challenges, if not blatant impediments, to fostering a state of "interdisciplinarity" between dance and visual art.

(1) Completely different relations to capital:

The most stark gulf, it seems to me, between visual art and dance, is their different relations to capital. Contemporary and modern dance is a labor intensive, shadow sub-economy, relying largely on unpaid or low paid labor, operating largely outside of capital formation. There are maybe dance companies in New York, the contemporary dance mecca of the US, that offer a living wage (i.e. that if accepted to these companies, dancers can make their living without holding a “survival job”): NYC Ballet, Merce Cunningham, Shen Wei, Trisha Brown, and Bill T. Jones.

Meanwhile, the supercommodity-pedaling flush art market of visual art is capitalism’s darling, a shadow of its stock market, a beneficiary of Bush’s neoliberal tax cuts for the rich prosperity. The ramifications of this are manifold. I have one dance critic friend who thinks the result of visual art having more money than dance is that the former is much more relaxed, while the latter feels constantly under siege, in a survivalist mode, with a much higher rate of attrition of deserters.

(2) Different relations to written discourse:

Visual art is intertwined, dependent upon for its viability and entrenched in the world of verbal discourse in way that dance is simply not. My dance friends are always really surprised, shocked and copiously grateful if I have written about them, whereas visual artists just take for granted they will be written about. Visual artists expect, and take for granted that the end product of their work will be written discourse of a fairly sophisticated and complex nature. There is immediate respect and understanding given to you when you say to visual artists that you are an art critic, a feeling that visual artists understand what being an art critic might entail; whereas this is simply not the case when you tell dancers you are a dance critic (not across the board anyways, maybe in highly specific communities, like Movement Research). There is perhaps sometimes a showboat perception amongst commercially-oriented dancers that one only becomes a dance critic if one “can’t make it” as a dancer, or has aged out of being a viable dancer. The “brass ring” is the stage, the also-ran consolation prize is to write about dance. Visual artists for whatever reason don’t seem to have this view of art critics (that it is a consolation-prize to making visual art, but instead a vital, even essential, complement to it). Visual art has such strong ties with the discursive world; it is allied with philosophy, anthropology, political history, in a way that I don’t believe dance is.

(3) Genealogies of the Body

Visual art and dance have completely different relations to, and genealogies of the body. The body was brought into visual art as a subversive guerilla warfare tactic or a democratizing impulse, to render the body an agent of transgression and at times an expression of decay, chaos, or masochism. The focus on the body in visual art stemmed from movements like minimalism that formed a self-conscious awareness of our own bodily presence as viewer, of one’s perceptual immersion or sensorial immediacy in a space (installation art), and art in active dialogue with the things and the space which contains it (site-specific art).

On the contrary, in Western modern dance, its progenitor being ballet, the body is a given, the status quo, "the Establishment" and something one subjects to rigorous regimentation (turnout, 5 positions), strict aesthetic codification (standardization of positions), rules, and the assumption of bodily perfectability and goal of elevation of virtuosity.

All the tactics that visual art brings in to dematerialize and de-commodify its field, to strip it of its art object/commodity focus—transience, impermanence, performance, the body—are already status quo givens in the world of dance.

(4) Patriarchal vs. Matriarchal

Modern dance has largely been the domain of women (if not in its leading choreographers, certainly in its foot soldiers), whereas visual art, up until relatively recently, was largely male-dominated (certainly the canon remains so). It is not only populated mostly by women, dance is cultural coded as feminine; as women's art. It was only within the last 5 years a Ph.D Program was invented for dance history (a Ph.D in dance history by itself, not in combination with theatre) in all of the United States, and there is only one university where you can get it. Can you imagine how laughably ludicrous it is trying to picture if it was only in the last 5 years that a Ph.D program was invented for art history, and there was only one university in all of the United States you could get it? Is this perhaps not a direct consequence of the fact that dance is female-dominated and visual art is male-dominated? There is a deep-rooted resistance in society to an acceptance that art of women is worthy of reflection, rumination, analysis, and theorization, the way that art of men is.

(5) Historical trajectories

The historical trajectories in 20th century Western visual art were often based on a radical negation: a dialectical overturning of 1. thesis 2. antithesis leading to 3. (new) synthesis. Each movement negates what comes before: Impressionists negate the smooth finish of the Salon painting, the Vienna Secession negates the historicism of the prevailing Vienna Künstlerhaus, Duchamp negates accepted preconceptions about what art is (his epithet, "retinal art"), minimalism negates abstract expressionist heroic angst and pictorialism, Pop art negates ab ex's infatuation with the singular gesture of humanist expressivity, Bauhaus negates separation of form and function, art and craft, implied by expressionism.

Whereas different movements in visual art often come about from negation, I would say different schools of modern dance come about in a more rhizomatic fashion, as barnacles or offshoots, rather than predicated on an explicit rejection of something. Where one comes from in dance, or simply the movement historically preceding you, is not something so much to be rejected, as continued but altered according to your own sensibilities (perhaps somewhat akin to how the fashion world works). Erick Hawkins comes from Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey comes from Horton, Lar Lubovitch comes from Graham, Kosol-Ja Hwang comes from the Wooster Group, Miguel Gutierrez from John Jasperse. You look for traces or clues of where they came from as influences in what work they are producing now. A thread of lineage, inheritance, progeny and apprenticeship runs through dance more so than in visual arts, which I feel like derives so much of its *raison d'être* from an estrangement from existing conditions and a transgression of accepted conventions.

Perhaps this has to do with art being male-dominated and dance being female-dominated—there is a machismo or bravado embedded in visual art's modus operandi of negation, whereas dance is more collaborative and less prone to risk-laden phallic gestures of rejection, of grandiloquent claims of "Everything that came before me was the wrong idea of what art is: I am what is right."

Contact improvisation and butoh are the only dance forms in the 20th century that completely overturned the vocabulary of modern dance. Dance would have to, for every decade of the 20th century, create one dance form that was as radical as contact improvisation and butoh (in its restructuring of the vocabulary, methods, and foundation of modern dance) in order to catch up to the visual arts' proliferation of "movements" that completely broke with and radically negated previous basic definitions of what visual art is (i.e. the Readymade, minimalism, pop art, land art, conceptual art, environments, appropriation art, body art, site specific art, installation art, institutional critique, performance art, public art, mail art, etc). The unique feature of the visual arts is that every movement that negates existing movements, rather than becoming marginalized as a cult or a fringe phenomenon and relegated to the periphery of "experimentalism" (which it would in dance, music, theater, and literature), instead eventually reconstitutes the definition of what visual art is and becomes the next "center" or hegemonic form. The norm or status quo has a tremendous plasticity in the visual arts.

James Joyce's Ulysess introduced a radical new way of writing literature, but that didn't become the new norm of how to write novels. Butoh is a radical change from what came before in modern dance, but it didn't ascend to a new norm—it is still an experimental cult. Steve Reich changed the definition of what Western concert music is—but his music didn't become a new norm, it's a highly rarefied intelligentsia cult. Yet all these things that radically reconstituted what visual art is (the Readymade, minimalism, pop art, installation art, institutional critique, public art)—they are not relegated to the periphery of experimentalism within visual art, known only by some highly elite Ph.d-wielding ghetto—they become a new "center."

What constitutes visual art in 1999 and what constitutes visual art in 1930 IS RADICALLY DIFFERENT. This doesn't apply to any other art form. The basic form and foundation of a novel in 1999 is not that different from what constitutes a novel in 1930 (the only possible exception being hypertext). Films in 1999 still have narratives and characters and linear chronology, just as they did in 1930. (Concert) music still has a scale and time signature in 1999 just as it did in 1930. Music would have to change its entire do re mi scale and its notion of time signatures and come up with a new foundation for how to compose music every 10 years in the 20th century (such as "noise" music), to catch up to the visual arts' ability to overturn its foundations. Theater would have to change its idea of what a play is and what a stage is every 10 years for the last 100 years (as Brecht started to do), to catch up to the visual arts' overturning of its basic definition of what it is in the 20th century.

Speaking of estrangement from existing conditions, to its credit, the visual arts is the only field where an entire new genre of visual art was predicated upon a feminist critique of its own field. No other art field (i.e. dance, literature, theater, music, film) produced an entire new wing or genre within its ranks, based on a feminist critique of its existing canon. In the 20th century, there is no feminist film movement, no feminist theater movement, no feminist (concert) music

movement, no feminist modern dance movement—not at the level where that movement gets institutional support, validation, and eventually becomes part of the canon, the way feminist visual art has (Kruger, Holzer, Sherman). Most notably, feminist visual art is not just visual art made by feminists, but its very *raison d'être* and content is predicated upon structural deconstructions of patriarchy in visual art. There is no other art form (theater, dance, literature, film) that has come anywhere close to achieving that equivalence within its field. There is no film, theater, or literature movement that comes from female artists' in those fields commentary on how their field is male-dominated, that eventually ascends to being a new canon within that field.

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