

NOTES ON WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN TO BE INTERDISCIPLINARY

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These days, it seems like every four minutes and thirty three seconds a new interdisciplinary BFA or MFA program starts up. What's all the craze for all this interdisciplining?

When we think of what it might mean for a higher education program to be interdisciplinary by title and by praxis, what might come to mind is a vast abundance of knowledge, one tier and tidbit above the rest. A depth of knowledge far superior to those monodisciplines of yesteryear, and a worldly breadth worth bragging about. With an interdisciplinary study, anything is possible. The world is our interdisciplinary oyster.

Really, just think of the possibilities! A video installation with overlaid video projections superimposed by video stills and screencaptures from the editing process! An artsy activisty project dealing with activisty issues in an artsy way! A performance that blurs the lines between performance and, uh, well anything really! Artist as investor as collector as spectator as curator as artist as such! A zine that's also a painting!

Even so, interdisciplinary is a double-edged sword. On one hand, these programs and practices offer a kind of solace to the crisis of being an artist in the 21st century. To be interdisciplinary is to be multi-applicable, and in such a way more likely to find applicable work. As technology, social media and the art market do their proliferate-and-implode dance, being interdisciplinary is a first-class ticket to not falling off the relevance train. Better yet and boiled down to its essence, to be interdisciplinary is to be savvy. Not all-knowing—since curiosity is key—but so savvy.

On the other hand, this idea of artists being newly emancipated as interdisciplinary bleeds irony. When broken down, inter- modifies discipline. At face value, interdisciplinary means an occupancy between or among fields. Another definition is, vis-à-vis the sociopolitical definition of discipline, a merging of rules and codes from different institutions (i.e. state, religious, private sector, art) into a comprehensive system of behavioral control and punishment. Further, since inter- denotes a reciprocal function, being interdisciplinary implies a capitalist incentive towards centralized wealth, economic expansion and mass incarceration.

The current interdisciplinary fad actually fits in line with Michel Foucault's four-step program of torture, punishment, discipline and prison. In the art world, the pressure to be somehow interdisciplinary involves an initial cultural hazing to adopt the desire, followed by indebtedness to an acronym-granting interdisciplinary program of choice, then followed by the comforting assurance at gallery opening after-parties and "wtf is Navient?" messageboard threads alike that an interdisciplinary artist is in good company, and finally culminated by the paradoxical discovery that, despite all of an interdisciplinary artist's virtues, skills and insight, they remain an inmate to the psycho-penal art market that reared them. The interdisciplinary artist is the aesthetic ambassador of humanitarians and reformists.

What is an artist to do then, paint painterly paintings with paint? Said reaction would be just that—reactionary—and is not recommended. We're told that interdisciplinary is contemporary. The issue isn't that this is untrue, but precisely that when the art world floods society and the market with all its interdisciplinary amalgamations, the contemporary adopts them and is shaped to be interdisciplinary itself. Amidst a sprinkle of cultural achievements and neat art, said interdisciplinary contemporary has as of yet brought us neo-neoliberalism, the '07-'09 subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent recession in the United States, annual catastrophic oil spills, trivial debates over the the scientific validity of climate change, and a war targeting all-things-terror with precise ambiguity. To borrow protomodernist architect Adolf Loos' notion of the ornament, these geopolitical happenings render the contemporary as in fact being more ornamental than contemporary in every sense.

Part of the problem with the logos of the interdisciplinary artist as such is that their title can't be anything but after-the-fact and besides-the-point. Not unlike the four decades it took for gentrification to become a household word, artists have intermingled among different disciplines since the advent of modernity (if not since the Renaissance period). The notion of artist practices being particularly and namely interdisciplinary as of late could be seen as a moralistic throwback to Immanuel Kant's lately unloved categorical imperative. Just as it is impossible to possess and act on one's own free will without a moral law granting and regulating freedom, so goes the Kantian argument, it is likewise invalid for an artist to have a multifaceted practice without license and nametag.

To identify primarily as interdisciplinary is to say "I'm an artist and I do different things," at which point the world yawns and loses interest. Inter- trans- meta- pan- whatever-disciplinary, the contemporary artist's only studio space is the conditions of postmodernity, and artists should resist the imperative to categorize.