

“Locating Interdisciplinarity: Technology and the Humanities” panel
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The Thread of Meaning: A Reflection on Interdisciplinarity and Art. By Catherine Crowe

Interdisciplinarity

This paper is more of a personal reflection than a scholarly essay. I am an artist and a musician. I don't live in an academic world, though I do pursue some independent academic research. I am more comfortable in the personal realm, and it gave me a way to focus a very large topic.

First I would like to outline the nature of the interdisciplinarity of my work. I began with a degree in philosophy and history. I chose philosophy because it was concerned with the thing that I was most concerned with, namely ideas. I chose history because there were questions I wanted answered about the past – which had always fascinated me. I also pursued more concrete interests in theatre and art. From the beginning these pursuits were all intricately interconnected. For me ideas and action have always gone together. One without the other makes as much sense as dancing without music.

Until the completion of my degree, my parents and my government (who paid for my education) had entirely financially supported me. I was nevertheless aware of a responsibility to develop at least a measure of financial independence, so I entered the working world in a low paying factory job. Luckily, I happened to get a job at a small factory that housed other nascent intellectuals and artists like me and I found it as productive a sphere for pursuing ideas as the University had been.

At the same time, I was also discovering my Irish heritage. My father was born in Ireland, and when he immigrated to Canada, as many had after the Second World War, he had no wish to proclaim his heritage – in fact he was delighted to be able to leave all of that behind. It was through my Uncle, my father's youngest brother and the last to come over from Ireland, that I was introduced into the Irish diasporic community in Toronto – less visible, but as vibrant, tightly knit and culturally grounded as the other more visible ethnicities in Toronto. This contact sparked an interest in Irish music, theatre, literature and art– but

also a completely new sense of community. I loved the Irish. They were literate, charming, creative and they loved to talk! This arena now seemed the most fertile ground for making a career that fostered my real pursuit: engaging others in fruitful discourse in search of meaning.

So I left the factory and worked in various professional theatres, both on and back stage. I was particularly attracted to the alternative company, Pelican Players, where I helped write the plays as well as act in them and design and build the sets. When I couldn't find a paying gig, I worked with amateur companies like the Toronto Irish Players. Between contracts, I worked part time for various costume jewellery companies. In my spare time, I joined musical sessions. When I had a part in an historical drama – it shook out my academic skills and researched the period. My musical endeavours led me into another community that loved to discourse, and that introduced new questions. So I began researching again. This led me into the fields of ethno-musicology, sociology and psychology.

Investigating jewellery design led me to archaeology. It also led me to my chosen medium of enamelling, which is highly technical and requires some knowledge of physics. A visit to Ireland in 1984 made an historical connection between enamel and the Celts reaching back to the 3rd century BCE and I was hooked.

Archaeology led me to anthropology to try and contextualize the artefacts and this led me to mythology and folklore. This study, which had originated in my jewellery design, now began to impact my choice of songs. Things were starting to come full circle.

My studies were also fuelled by my experience. In other words, going to exhibitions and performances and interacting with people - seeing them respond to my work and my ideas - profoundly influenced, and was an integral part of, the whole process of creating meaning. I didn't just sell merchandise – I wanted my work to affect people emotionally, intellectually, viscerally, I wanted to change the way they thought. I

wanted to engage them. For this reason I have also become active in organizing exhibitions and conferences to further these goals of interaction among the larger artistic and musical communities.

I never really thought of my varied pursuits and interests as separate disciplines. My lived experience was that I was following a single thread – a thread of meaning that had both personal and universal characteristics. This thread led through a complex labyrinth, and often rejoined a path that I thought I had left some turns before. I also want to emphasize that it was not just my intellect that was engaged but my emotions too – I felt *passionate* about these ideas. And once I delved into the world of mythology my quest was also about the subconscious and the archetypal. I was not just looking for ideas that were intellectually satisfying – but really trying to dig deep and find what was close to the bone.

“The essence of beauty is a feeling of repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect and the affectations are satisfied by the absence of any want.” Owen Jones

There was probably a time when some of the information I have acquired would have been considered common knowledge. I would argue that that time is firmly behind us. While I wouldn't want you to think that I am proclaiming myself to be an expert in any of these fields, in some of them I have a solid enough grounding to have an intelligent conversation with a specialist. My point is, that I am not sure that interdisciplinarity is possible without a broad general stock of information to draw from, as context. It was my personal and artistic uses of the information that translated it beyond the normal realm of intellect and into one that I would like to think is more multi-dimensional, and thus more fully human.

I am aware that I am in a charmed position, because I can follow my Muse – which is the artist's prerogative. I know, for example, that between the academic disciplines of archaeology and anthropology there are contentious procedural arguments. There are processualists and post-processualists who stake out and defend territory that I don't even have to enter. I try to proceed with discipline and at least a measure of integrity, but I don't have to be political or tactical.

Today I designate myself as an enamellist, a teacher, a performer and a community arts activist. But I am first and foremost still a thinker, and a person in relationship with others. I am endlessly curious, so interdisciplinarity is not something I can locate – it is who I am.

Technology

Like most artists of my generation I have an uneasy relationship with technology as an artistic tool. This is often not the case with the younger generation, but I freely admit my archaism in this area.

The computer has undoubtedly proved an invaluable tool for some aspects of my work. I can use it to make professional promotional material, whereas I used to rent time on the typewriters available at the library and then cut and paste the resulting text and Xerox it. Where I used to rely on out of date publications from the Ontario Craft Council to find shows, I can now google and find shows anywhere in the world that are specific to my medium and approach.

I have been able to meet and connect with other enamellists around the world who can help me solve technical problems - usually within a couple of days. This is a dramatic improvement, since I taught myself how to enamel almost entirely from books and worked in almost complete isolation for close to 15 years. This online community is now an invaluable support and also a place that I can be of use to others.

As an independent researcher, the Internet has been invaluable in putting me in touch with scholars in obscure fields. There are groups that include the best scholars in the world on topics as obscure as Irish Iron Age Archaeology and Early Medieval History. The reading recommendations of these generous scholars alone have been worth their weight in gold.

But it is not only recommendations – but actual conversations and meaningful discourse that I get from these on-line interactions. The ability to follow my own thread of research, and check on my progress with top scholars means that I can map my own road through the information. Taking a degree would limit me to fields of study prescribed by others.

"The alternative to the dependence of a society on its schools is not the creation of new devices to make people learn what the experts have decided they need to know; rather it is the creation of a radically new relationship between human beings and their environment. A society committed to high levels of shared learning and personal intercourse, free yet critical, cannot exist unless it sets pedagogically motivated constraints on its institutional and industrial growth." Ivan Illich

On the down side, the computer has eaten up countless hours of my time that might have been better spent in the studio, or in congenial company.

In spite of an extensive website, frequent blogging, membership in countless social and business networks I have yet to find the Internet an adequate tool for meeting my goals as an artist, either financial or aesthetic. It will come as a surprise to many who promote the Internet as a sales tool that it, in reality, it has adversely affected my ability to make a living. Before the prevalence of Internet shopping, the economic engine of a show was the urgency to buy. The items at the show were understood to be only available then and there. Now that I have a website, people no longer feel this urgency. I can still engage them, but the sales don't necessarily follow since they can now put my website in their pocket, secure in the knowledge that the particular thing they were interested in is available at any time. The spontaneity of the moment is lost. In other words, my interactions are less likely to end in a sale. While there is a lot of virtual interaction on the Internet – there is not much real engagement.

The computer gives me easier access to images of historical artefacts that are my main source of inspiration, but other than that it is useless to me as a design tool. The hours it would take me to learn how to draw with an illustration program would not give me any advantage in speed or control than I presently have with the older and more tangible technologies of pencil and paper.

Enamelling itself is not very amenable to manufacturing technologies. While a silversmith can design and execute a wax model of a piece, and then cast thousands of replicas – the enamellist must deal with each piece individually. Even if the metal

substructure is manufactured (as it sometimes is), each piece must still be prepared, inlaid, fired and finished individually.

My experience with technology in music is just as ambiguous as my experience in visual art. My ability to study traditional styles is made possible only with the use of technology. Some of the technologies are now obsolete – like reel-to-reel tapes – and there is an urgent need to digitize this material before it is lost.

The musician's relationship with their community of listeners has been severely affected by the encroachment of technologies, even ones as obsolete as the radio. People now rarely gather to sing and tell stories. I have spent several years now, studying and learning to sing the traditional music of Ireland. The more that I learn, the more I realise how much has changed since these traditions were a part of people's everyday life instead of a 'profession'. I spend a good deal of time studying the styles of older singers, and I have succeeded in achieving a high enough degree of authenticity that the delivery is often incomprehensible to listeners who are not familiar with the idiom. People have a desire to participate – superficially by banging spoons or learning one song that is sung and re-sung endlessly - but no deep connection, and also no understanding that one of the ways to participate is to listen.

Mass media has contributed to the homogenization of all kinds of traditional music and art. For some this is heralded as a democratizing influence, but I lament the loss of diversity – especially subtle diversity. The way a traditional singer or player improvises is often within such small parameters that a thorough knowledge of the idiom is necessary before they are even noticeable.

I don't and never have owned a cell phone. No one needs enamelling or singing done urgently, so I can wait until I get home to take a message. I don't want to be interrupted while I am working as enamelling requires a high level of concentration and focus, and I am easily distracted. People often say I 'have to' have a cell phone since I travel frequently and it's not safe without one. I have been travelling extensively for 15 years and the reality is that when I have found myself in trouble while on the road there is always someone around willing to help. When I travel I want to engage with the strangers around me – if I had a cell phone that would be compromised.

"The world of technology has somehow become more real than the world that we experience with our senses." David Abrams

Like most tools, computers have advantages and disadvantages and can be used and misused. In modern society, the value placed on productivity is very high, and computers are very good at increasing productivity. But the intangible costs are less obvious: time, space, personal contact and, most importantly, personal autonomy. I think these losses can be mitigated.

My own discomfort with so much technology has led to some personal changes, as this past year I felt the need to unplug myself. Part of the problem was the shifting sand that this tool has become – with programs being upgraded constantly and enormous time and effort spent just keeping up. I stopped taking my laptop with me everywhere. I have limited my use of it to strict parameters, and I try not to use it in my home, where I would like to be able to pay attention to the people around me, to nature, drawing, but most importantly to just thinking. Because it can be such an effective tool, the temptation is to use it all the time – which means I am working all the time and not creating: it can actually interfere with the human creative process.

The House That Technology Has Built.

When I first started to think about this paper, I couldn't see how interdisciplinarity and technology were related – but I took my cue from Canadian, Ursula Franklin, who is a physicist, metallurgist, scholar, feminist, pacifist, environmentalist, activist, and one of my heroes. You might say that there is some interdisciplinarity located around her. In her book, "The Real World of Technology", she partially defines technology simply as practice, and I found this definition illuminating. She divides technologies of practice into holistic technologies and prescriptive technologies.

Holistic technologies are those normally associated with the notion of craft: enamellists and potters but also cooks and farmers. Their hands and minds make situational decisions as the work proceeds. They reflect an intimate relationship with the material that they manipulate – and offer a large degree of control and autonomy. They are also interdisciplinary in the

sense that the potter must know how to make the clay, how to shape it, how to fire it, how to finish it.

A prescriptive technology is normally associated with industrial processes, where the steps are broken down. In our pottery example, one person would specialize in the formulation of the clay, another would shape it, a third would fire it and a fourth would finish it. This process requires a fifth person: the manager. This person must know each of the steps intimately – and must prescribe minutely the behaviour of those under him/her, so that the outcome will be predictable. It is a technology that demands compliance.

"Prescriptive technologies eliminate occasions for decision-making and judgement in general, and especially for the making of *principled* decisions." Ursula Franklin

These definitions do not imply that there was a golden past when all technologies were holistic and now we have degraded into a society that prescribes everything. Nor do they imply a division between art and industry (theatre can be a very prescriptive technology) It is not a question of a golden past and a corrupted present, but of finding technologies that are appropriate. For some tasks, prescriptive technologies really are best. But, in the words of Ivan Illich, they should also be "convivial".

To me, the field called 'Interdisciplinary Studies' is only necessary because of the application of a prescriptive technology in education where a holistic one is more natural. Educational curricula have become so prescribed that there is an unnatural tendency to compartmentalisation that is not inherent in the learning process. It is considered to more productive, but I believe that it is unnatural and alienating to learn this way – keeping us always in the realms of the measurable and eliminating the possibility of transcendence. I also feel that it prevents academic research from making a useful contribution to community life.

This bias for prescriptive technologies affects many professions. Even in the area of health people are so used to accepting the doctors' prescriptions that they have lost the ability to experience their own bodies. "Modern Art" and the public's alienation from it are a function and a symptom of the professionalization of "Art". In art the public has become a despised rabble. In fact, they have become marginalized

precisely because they are excluded from the prescriptive constructs that the post-modernists have set up (in spite of their stated goals to break down barriers). "Experts" do not have a sense of a community that they are engaged for and with. For me, the artist's function as a creator of meaning for the community is paramount.

"Far from being peripheral, dysfunctional, trivial or illusory, the visual arts have been part of human beings' most serious and vital concerns. If they are not so today we should perhaps look for the reason not simply in some flawed metaphysical status of the concept of art, but rather in the way we live.... We must rescue art from those who would falsely idolize, cynically trivialize, self-righteously limit, philosophically vaporize or ... ignorantly dismiss ... it." Ellen Dissanayake

I do have wider concerns about the impact of technology, especially computers, on society, culture and on individuals. In Ursula Franklin's words, "People are seen as sources of problems while technology is seen as a source of solutions. The notion that maybe technology constitutes a source of problems and grievances and people might be looked upon as a source of solutions has rarely entered public policy or even public consciousness."¹

We think in terms of effectiveness rather than thinking about what it means to be human. We have almost come to think of ourselves as essentially flawed systems that can only be redeemed by technology. We discuss technology endlessly – but when and where do we discuss what it means to be human?

"...it (technology) deprives those affected by it of their freedom and power to act autonomously, to live creatively; it confines them to survival through being plugged in ... And precisely because this new impotence is so deeply experienced, it is with difficulty expressed."² The loss of personal autonomy is of critical concern.

Since the introduction of the simplest technologies, there have been people afraid of their affect on society. The reality is that many advantages were

undeniably gained. The dire consequences that were predicted often didn't come to pass, but some of them did, and are as yet unexamined. Perhaps more importantly many of the promises have not been realised. The massive amounts of information available to everyone have not increased people's engagement in democracy. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. In spite of Ivan Illich's powerful and convincing arguments back in the 1970's in "De-schooling Society" – namely that education does not necessarily improve the lives of people in so-called "developing" countries – we still continue to inflict it on them – and there is very little critical discourse about how we do it.

"As I see it, technology has built the house in which we all live. The house is continually being extended and remodelled. More and more of human life takes place within its walls, so that today there is hardly any activity that does not occur within this house. All are affected by the design of the house, by the division of its space, by the location of its doors and walls. Compared to people in earlier times, we rarely have a chance to live outside this house."³

I am not advocating that technology should be abandoned – only that we should pay heed to the construction of the house. There should be room for people to live outside of the house if they so choose, and we need to be more conscious of who is allowed into the rooms – and who is kept out.

"In the course of living with and conversing with traditional people ... I had to learn a way of speaking that allowed each thing its own active agency and as I took on this way of speaking my own senses became much more awake to where I was and I started noticing the outrageousness of the real world that surrounded me on every side: everything became fascinating and strangely weird each in its own way because I was now listening and looking at things with a kind of expectancy - no longer just defining them as inert or determinate things or processes. I was sensing that there was an otherness present in every aspect of the universal world that everything has its own interior spontaneity." David Abrams

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¹ Franklin, Ursula, "The Real World of Technology", p72

² Illich, Ivan, "Towards a History of Needs", p vii

³ Franklin, Ursula "The Real World of Technology" p

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