

CROSSING DISCIPLINES

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This issue of *Scope: Art & Design* focuses on the crossing of disciplines. Where disciplines function alongside one another, the term 'multi-disciplinary' is appropriate. Where they integrate to such an extent that their boundaries become indistinct, 'interdisciplinary' is more apt. Perhaps our era will become known as the time of cross-disciplinary approaches (including both multi- and inter- possibilities). Toshiko Mori writes: "The age of...the strict division of labor is collapsing around us"¹. In any event, the corollaries of a crossing of disciplines are wide-ranging as is evident across the contributions in this issue of the journal. What are clearly recognisable are the willingness to collaborate and the urge for collective action. Energy is released in the process. The reader becomes aware of a sense of freedom experienced by the participants in communal endeavours. There is support for one another and a sense of joint achievement.

Cross-disciplinary work tends to break down barriers and extend limitations. The power of a single authorial voice is side-stepped or problematised. Participants seem less inhibited and less protective of their own terrain in projects that invite group work and sharing of ideas, new understandings and new possibilities. Crossing disciplines also leads to other kinds of crossovers: cross-cultures, cross-geographies, cross-generations, cross-chronologies. Such crossovers are also evident from the material included in this issue of the journal.

Some contributions to the issue stem from writing or making between domains. An example is where Rekha Rana and Simon Swale are positioning their creative drapery between fashion design and a sculptural understanding of materials. Other contributors seek out topics which lend themselves to cross-disciplinary thinking, such as where Leoni Schmidt examines an architectural practice which is characterised by integrative design principles. Cross-cultural understandings emerge from Steev Peyroux's report on a working visit to Rarotonga. Sue Taylor bases her making and writing on psychoanalysis and feminist theory. Johanna Zellmer investigates ways in which jewellery and photography can speak together about experiences of migration. David Green reflects his thinking processes as an artist engaging with philosophy and the sciences. Many other examples of thinking, making and writing outside the limits of a specific discipline abound in this issue.

Perhaps art lends itself *par excellence* to crossovers. This speaks clearly from the statements made by artists quoted by Sunkita Howard and Jenny Rock in their perspective of the 2013 Art and Neuroscience Project undertaken by a group of artists centred around the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic and a group of scientists in the Brain Research Centre at the University of Otago. Many small contributions to this issue of the journal represent extended participation and considered creative responses to the work undertaken by the scientists. Added up, these contributions become more than the sum of their parts as they provide valuable insights into the ways in which art and science can productively cross over.

This is also the case with contributions from the 2014 Art and Anatomy Project, for which another group of scientists – this time from the Department of Anatomy at the University of Otago – worked with a group of artists again centred around the Dunedin School of Art. Interestingly, this project enabled artists to work inside some of the university facilities, for example in the Anatomy Museum and the Medical Library. New avenues were opened up and continuing partnerships set up. The project in mind for 2015 will focus on artists and scientists working together on *light*, this being the focus of the UNESCO Year of Light next year. Again, the Dunedin School of Art will be involved, this time partnering with the Dodd-Walls Centre for Photonic and Quantum Technologies, a National Centre of Research Excellence at the University of Otago.

There is something tenacious about cross-disciplinary workers. They rise to the challenge and hold onto the task. Perhaps this is because they feel confident in their home territory and can venture out from that with a mind open to new possibilities. Disciplines bring with them particular histories, theoretical frameworks, methodologies and vocabularies. Becoming immersed is like learning a new language – hard to do if you have no language to start off with. William H Newell wrote a 1983 paper – reprinted many times since then – entitled “The Case for Interdisciplinary Studies”² (as a response to Thomas C Benson’s article “Five Arguments against Interdisciplinary Studies” (1982)).³ The arguments go that interdisciplinary study can lead to confusion **or** new insights; requires a secure base in a specific discipline before **or** during their deployment; impedes **or** enhances disciplinary competence; leads to shallowness **or** breadth of scope; and that they are expensive to maintain in the shorter term **or** more sustainable than disciplinary approaches in the longer term.

A concise summary of the virtues of crossing disciplines is provided early on in Newell’s paper where he states: “Interdisciplinary study should be understood to start with the confrontation of the interdisciplinarian with the world, be it a problem, an event, or even a painting. Out of that phenomenological confrontation comes a question, one which is too broad to be answered by any single discipline. The strategy of the interdisciplinarian is to bring the relevant disciplines...to bear upon the question, one at a time, letting each illuminate that aspect of the question which is amenable to treatment by the characteristic concepts, theories, and methods of the respective disciplines.”⁴ Disciplines are crucial as they provide the “amenable treatment”; crossovers seek the bigger picture, an extension of the field of enquiry; they look for ingenuity and the multi-faceted.

Sometimes, it’s a matter of communication as scientists are increasingly expected to articulate the relevance of their endeavours to those who fund their work. What better way than a public exhibition that visualises their processes. Artists strive for agency in the world. What better way than engaging with real life issues like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s and the anatomy of the human body?

This issue of *Scope: Art & Design* is compiled to surprise and enlighten the reader about the many ways in which artists and designers can interface with a wide range of fields of endeavour and cultural contexts here in Dunedin: philosophy, psychology, anatomy, architecture, neuroscience, art + design, traditional island culture in the Pacific, pattern-making codes from India, Islamic ornamentation, identity and immigration, the politics of memory...and many more. I hope that this issue will contribute in a small way to inspiring readers to enter the discourses around crossing disciplines in our exciting times during which “the strict division of labor...[is] collapsing around us.”⁵

Mori’s statement also rang true at the recent Art + Book Symposium held at the Dunedin School of Art in conjunction with the University of Otago and the Dunedin City Council. This was the sixth in our Art + series; there have been Art + Science (with scientists from the University of Otago), Art + Law (with the Faculty of Law), Art + Medicine (with the Faculty of Medicine), Art + Food, (with our Bachelor of Culinary Arts programme and the Centre for Sustainability at the University), and Art + Money (with Brandbach at the Business School of the University). Taken as a whole, these symposia and the projects mentioned earlier provide our students and communities with a rich vein of crossover thinking and fertile soil for their creative endeavours.

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1 Toshiko Mori, *Immaterial/Ultramaterial: Architecture, Design, and Materials* (New York: George Braziller, 2002: xv).

2 William H Newell, “The Case for Interdisciplinary Studies: Response to Professor Benson’s Five Arguments”, *Issues in Integrative Studies*, 2 (1983), 1-19.

3 Thomas C Benson, “Five Arguments against Interdisciplinary Studies”, *Issues in Integrative Studies*, 1 (1982), 38-48.

4 See endnote 2: 1.

5 See endnote 1.



Figure 1: People interact with Rowan Holt's work, *Hopes*, at the Art and Neuroscience Exhibition, 2013 at the Hunter Centre, University of Otago, Dunedin.