

Response to Intermedia@Iowa  
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"So, you're an artist!" the conversation usually begins, inevitably followed by the question, "What type of art do you do?"

I have found that the single, most effective way to end this conversation is to reply, "Intermedia art." But in the rare instances in which the conversation progresses to the next question, "What is intermedia art?" the following answer almost certainly ends it: "It's a conceptually-based art form that puts the primacy of concept over media."

Although this is as brief and concise a definition as I can come up with, it usually produces a glazed look and a shift to other topics. Now, contrary to all appearances, conversations such as this are not an exercise in art snobbery. Rather, intermedia art is so complex and foreign to habituated ways of understanding art that it's almost impossible to overcome in casual conversation. In fact, even after an entire semester in introductory Intermedia, some of my students never quite 'get it.' Of course, for those who do, the experience can be life-altering. It broadens their perspective and they gain, if not a purely intermedial approach to their own art making, at least a new, interdisciplinary approach to it.

I have found, in fact, that although intermedia is at first confusing, this is not a negative. Rather, one of its more important purposes is to push people from positions of security into positions of questioning. It's in the struggle to bring order to confusion that intermedia art gains its power.

Intermedia art, then, is as wide and deep as human experience itself. Instead of attempting to encapsulate itself in a tidy envelope, intermedia revels in imperfection, complexity, and contradiction. It pokes at the edges of things, turns over rocks, illuminates darkened corners, delineates the lines between dots. It conducts its research on the human condition not from an aloof, external viewpoint, but through immersion. It does not, in fact, bestow objectivity any place of privilege whatsoever. And despite postmodernism's disdain of the notion, I believe there is truth in its subjectivity.

That intermedia is interdisciplinary and fully engaged with contemporary culture is a given. I would argue that contemporary culture (along with an examination of the historico-political underpinnings that have led up to it) comprises intermedia's main focus. Additionally, intermedia in definition, founding principles, and in practice, utilizes an interdisciplinary approach that fully encompasses new media. The web, hypermedia, non-linearity, social networks, locative media, ubiquitous computing are all elements that characterize this moment in our contemporary culture, and thus are of interest to intermedia. However, where a more traditional art approach might examine these media for their aesthetic potential, an intermedial approach contemplates them for what they mean. An intermedial art practice may therefore focus its attention on a particular aspect of new and emergent media, but it does not ignore the fact that there is a great stratification in access to these media. What does it mean, for example that in this

country we have instantaneous access to the most powerful communications tools ever developed, whereas elsewhere in the world communication entails a full-day's camel ride. As an intermedia artist views images of genocide piped into a screen in a comfortable living room in Iowa, they contemplate: what agency do I have in this, does the spectator create the spectacle; where does the real-world end and the map of the world begin; what is this pipe and who is controlling it; and finally, what responsibility do I have to respond to this. For it is only in this response, the active engagement with the multiple layers of meaning hidden in even the most banal of our interactions with the world, where the intermedia artist lives and works.

It is not easy to reconcile intermedia within an academic institutional setting where a vertical ascension to knowledge and understanding is the measure of success. The academician is encouraged to climb the tree as high as she can and report the view from there. The intermedia artist, on the other hand is probably more interested in questioning the significance of the tree itself and examining its relationship to the other trees around it. An academic approach values codification and organization. An intermedia approach values deconstruction of those very codes and organization schemes. A commercial perspective would argue that there is no place in an institution for a discipline that has as a core founding principle critique of the institution. As unlikely an alliance as it may be however, Intermedia has found a home, indeed an honored place at the University of Iowa table. I have often mused about this relationship. Why would a mother institution offer a home for this contrary, nagging and insistent child--what benefits does this bestow upon the institution? The answer I have come up with is that as contrary as this might seem, the honest and non-belligerent questioning of an institution actually promotes its health. This bestows upon the institution an evolutionary advantage ("academobiology?") in its mission to preserve and promote human culture. By being on the ship, we are given the opportunity to trim its sails, to adjust its course, to be a player in this grand narrative. I can live with that--but what does it mean that the sails are made of nylon; why do we assume that those people should be below deck; why are we always heading west; why not use these other knots...

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