

Approaching Interdisciplinary Process Through Collaborative Engagement, Communication, and Play

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Abstract—The purpose of this paper is to present an exploratory approach to the development of interdisciplinary art and performance. The creative process described here is designed to mimic the concept of “flocking”, in which a group of dancers generate movement intuitively and synchronously without ever defining a leader. The goal is to develop a pre-meditated process that can recreate this sense of unity and cohesion in a creative context spanning multiple disciplines. Key elements of this process are collaborative engagement, communication, and play. These concepts have been put into practice by a collective of artists who joined together to create a large-scale interdisciplinary work. The ideas put forth in this paper are not final, but rather exist as part of a continuously evolving body of research and creative investigation. The interdisciplinary project referenced in this paper is in itself a work in progress and warrants further documentation upon completion.

Index Terms—interdisciplinary process, engagement, flocking, play, collaborative

I. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has seen significant growth and development in the area of interdisciplinary performance [1]. As a musician and composer, I have been particularly drawn to the significant impact that these developments have had on the way in which composers such as John Cage, Mauricio Kagel, Heiner Goebbels, Dieter Schnebel, and George Aperghis—among many others—have come to consider traditionally disparate elements such as gesture, image, sound, material, and design as components that can, and should be, combined and integrated into a cohesive live performance [2]. This paper will introduce an exploratory approach to interdisciplinary process that has been developed and initiated over the past few months. The motivation behind developing this process-based approach stems from a desire to create a collaborative environment that is truly integrated and cohesive, in which material is generated collectively and organically, with minimal direction. The process of dissolving boundaries among different artistic disciplines is approached through the deliberate and thoughtful implementation of collaborative engagement, communication, and play. In addition to these three concepts, the distinction between interdisciplinary performance and inter-disciplinary process is a carefully considered component of this work.

II. MOTIVATION AND RELATED WORK

“Flocking”, as it applies in the field of dance and movement, is a term used to describe an improvisatory exercise in which multiple dancers stand in close proximity and mirror or imitate the actions of a leader [3]. The leader is whoever is standing at the front of the group when everyone is facing the same direction. As the group moves through the space or changes direction, there will be a new leader which everyone will now follow. The goal is to make these transitions between who is leading and who is following virtually imperceptible, to the point where the dancers themselves may not realize who the designated leader is at any given moment. The result is a fluid and intuitive mass of bodies, whose movements are at once synchronous and spontaneous.

Inspired by the practice of flocking, I began to investigate how this concept could be replicated in an interdisciplinary setting, to encompass multiple artistic disciplines, including non-movement based mediums. The resulting process can be broken down into three primary practices: collaborative engagement, communication, and play. In this approach, the creative process holds equal, if not more importance than the performance itself.

A comprehensive example of process-heavy creation can be found in Jörg U. Lensing’s writings [4] on *Integrated Theatre*. Lensing breaks down his process into numerous stages, the first of which is a blue sky brainstorming session, much like it is in the process defined in this paper. It is my opinion, however, that while Lensing’s work may result in interdisciplinary performance, it does not stem from a truly interdisciplinary *process*. For the purpose of this paper, an interdisciplinary process can be defined as one in which every collaborator, including lighting designers and musical interpreters, are present from the very inception of the piece. Interdisciplinary performance, on the other hand, is a staged event that draws from multiple disciplines, but could potentially have been developed in a more traditional additive fashion (i.e. working from a script or bringing musicians in only after the score has been composed).

One of the foremost challenges in creating interdisciplinary work is determining how to approach the generation of material in a way that is organic and integrated. In traditional theatre, the trajectory follows something like script–actors–movement–lighting, where the script serves as a foundation which informs

most, if not all, of the other elements in the performance. The interdisciplinary process explored in this paper is one in which all elements come together simultaneously, and yet not one serves to guide or support another. This very same desire is expressed by Georges Aperghis in [5] when he says: “The visual elements should not be allowed to reinforce or emphasize the music, and the music should not be allowed to underline the narrative”, and has been echoed by numerous other composers and artists of recent years [6]. The challenge then, becomes how to engage in the simultaneous creation of work without letting one particular medium overshadow another.

III. METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

In order to remain engaged with the creative and practical aspects of this work, I assembled a group of artists with whom I would apply and test these concepts. The group consisted of three musical interpreters/composers, two dancers, a choreographer, video designer, lighting designer, costume designer, and a scenic designer. We allotted ourselves a timeframe of eight months to develop, rehearse, and present a completely original work, with absolutely no material generated prior to the first rehearsal.

A. Stage 1

The preliminary stage of the rehearsal process was broken down into the following components: i. collaborative engagement; ii. communication; and iii. play. These components were designed to establish a sense of unity and cohesion amongst all of the artists; a baseline from which to begin generating material.

Collaborative Engagement

Engagement, both physical and mental, is integral to this interdisciplinary process. From the very first session, before any sounds or images or materials are introduced, the group is asked to become mentally and physically engaged in the process. Physical engagement is defined quite literally as having all collaborators present from the beginning and throughout the development process.

Mental engagement is facilitated through a series of brainstorming and discussion sessions in which everyone is asked to share something that they find truly fascinating, as well as something that challenges them artistically, intellectually, or otherwise. These prompts were designed to be open-ended in order to encourage discussion and to tap into potential topics and areas that the collaborators are passionate about or deeply involved with. At this point in the process we employ a blue sky approach, in which everything is considered and any door may be opened. These preliminary sessions are kept strictly dialogue based, in order to ensure that the overall concept for the piece is developed with a mutual

understanding and not guided by one particular medium.

Communication

(a) *Green Light Dialogue*: This approach to communication is drawn from [7], and is introduced early on in the process in order to encourage mutually receptive and productive dialogue. In a state of green light dialogue, conversation is flowing freely and is shared among all collaborators. This practice simply encourages everyone to check in with themselves periodically and to be aware of how the conversation is flowing, if it has become one-sided, or if it has reached a point of non-productivity.

(b) *Semantics*: Establishing a common semantic tool kit from which the collaborators can work is an important step toward dismantling the boundaries that exist between each respective artistic discipline. Doing so helps to establish a sense of unity and to encourage interdisciplinary discussion and feedback. Each discipline may have different ways of referring to the same concept (e.g. dynamics vs. volume), or may have slightly different meanings for the same words (e.g. brightness as a measurement of the intensity of light, as opposed to brightness of sound). In order to develop and create as a synchronous entity, a baseline for vocabulary and communication must be discovered. This practice is somewhat controversial, as it is believed by some that defining language can become stifling to the creative process. It is important to note that this is not intended to limit the collaborators to a specific vocabulary, but rather to empower them by giving everyone the necessary means to communicate in an informed and free manner.

Play

The notion of play was integrated into this process as a further means of diminishing barriers between the different artistic disciplines and of establishing a collaborative and unified ensemble. It is suggested that play, and the ability to interact with objects and people in a playful manner, facilitates creativity and spontaneity, and when performed in a group setting can instill a stronger sense of the collective [8].

Over the course of one or two sessions, each collaborator has a turn to share his or her discipline with the rest of the group by providing a basic introduction and perhaps giving a very brief demonstration. Following this, everyone is encouraged to interact with and explore each respective medium in a playful and curious manner. The goal is not to become an expert, or to “do it right”, but rather to

engage in lighthearted exploration. An example of one of these sessions could be a choreographer leading the group through a series of movement exercises, or a musician prompting everyone to generate a soundscape from found objects.

This practice provides each collaborator with a certain degree of insight into the other elements of the project, and awards them the opportunity to explore something new or unfamiliar in a hands-on and playful manner. The act of sharing something one is passionate about strengthens the intellectual and emotional relationship between the collaborators, which in turn strengthens the overall creative relationship of the group [9]. Furthermore, engaging in play is an accessible and entertaining way to heighten each members' awareness of his or her unique voice within the group, as well as to give room for discovery of how that voice may become integrated into the work as a whole.

B. Stage 2

Following the preliminary stage, the entire group engages in multiple sessions of structured prompt-based improvisation. This improvisation is not limited to instrumentalists and dancers. Instead it functions as an opportunity for everyone to explore their reactions to the previous weeks' discussions, through movement, light, projection, materials, text, and sound.

By this point in the process, there is a strong sense of understanding and community amongst the collaborators. An underlying concept or point of interest begins to emerge, without ever consciously attempting to decide upon one. The improvisations are recorded, and subsequently reviewed. Each collaborator is asked to pinpoint moments, gestures, colors, sounds, or any other material that they found to be particularly striking, as well as those that seemed unsuccessful. It is emphasized that they are not confined to their own medium, but rather should feel free to discuss any of the content. The selected items, moments, and ideas are compiled as a basis for constructing the final piece.

C. Stage 3

In the third stage, for the first time, the group begins to break apart for focused sessions. This is done mainly for efficiency, as well as to ensure that all of the material is adequately rehearsed and/or completed. During this stage, for example, the musical interpreters may break away to rehearse a specific section of music, or the costume designer may work independently on sewing or designs. It is important to note that these breakaway sessions do not replace the group meetings, but rather supplement them. All new material, sketches, and content are brought to the group and are discussed, workshopped, and developed collectively.

IV. FUTURE WORK

The main goal of this paper is to break down and describe the key components of this exploratory process. I have refrained from going into specific aesthetic or technical detail regarding the actual interdisciplinary piece that is being created, as I hope that these concepts may be considered and put into practice by other artists in different and unique ways

An in-depth look into the process of converting improvisation-generated material into composed elements, as well as the transition from rehearsal to performance, is beyond the scope of this paper, but warrants further investigation and documentation.

V. CONCLUSION

Through this work I aim to develop an interdisciplinary process that can be used to facilitate an organic and synchronous creative environment. After four months working in this manner, it is clear that the collaborative artists are responding well to the process, and the piece itself is progressing in a promising manner.

This process is both time consuming and demanding of a significant physical and mental commitment from everyone involved. Despite these factors, taking the time to engage each individual collaborator, establish a baseline for fluid and open communication, and encourage lighthearted play has been instrumental in achieving a sense of integration and inter-disciplinary cohesion.

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