

Taiwan 2018 International Conference on Cross-Disciplinary Aesthetic Education

October 5, 2018

Visual Arts and Cross-Disciplinary Teaching and Learning:

The Edge Effect

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The Future: A Reason for Optimism

This presentation offers a call for optimism and confidence in claiming a leading role for visual arts ~~as a~~ in the 21st century I recently returned to live in my home city of Sydney. My time in the United States was bracketed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, and the Presidency of Donald Trump. We were living in New York City at the time of 9/11, and in middle America at the time of Trump. These dramatic events were certainly not a cause of optimism for me, but a continual reminder that in times of extreme challenge we have to look inside ourselves for answers. We have to rely on our own knowledge and experience to guide our understanding, no matter how temporary it may be. Knowing something to be real and true is the outcome of self-reflection and purposeful action. Unlike fake news, self-awareness and self-understanding cannot be based on false perceptions or assumptions. For most of my career, I have reminded students, "you can't fake art, and you can't fake teaching."

I have good reason to be optimistic about the future because I believe in the power and resilience of art, education, creativity and culture to improve the human good. Furthermore, what we do as we make sense of the everyday realities and challenges we face, revolve around giving form to ideas and actions. As artists, teachers, researchers, theorists, and cultural practitioners we take on many roles. Irrespective of the creative and critical activities we participate in, they are transformative, adaptive, responsive, inclusive, accessible, and sustainable. In a 2007 study of visual artists between the ages of 62 and 97 actively working in New York, conclusive evidence was found that

artists never retire.¹ Your creative impulse gives you “unique solutions to embrace living,” and you will take it to your grave. What an amazing and sustainable human resource you are! It is because of you that I am optimistic.

The Past: A Cause for Pessimism

I also have reason to be pessimistic. Implementing innovative and effective curricula within our institutions is becoming increasingly constrained by cultural and political conservatism. Politics has a direct impact on everyone because it is about empowering and disempowering people. The decisions and actions we take in public are political because they affect others. Yet, participating in the political process is rarely equitable, especially for those who do not have the power or privilege to gain access.

Politics of Power

Let me give two examples of why I am pessimistic. The politics of power in the United States in recent decades has effectively disempowered teachers. Policies such as *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top*, and the privatization of schooling, have taken away the responsibility of the people in the best position to know what effective learning looks like. Public schooling is under intense pressure today. When one considers how U.S. schools are funded, the challenges facing school administrators, teachers and students are alarming. About 45% of revenue for public schools comes from local property taxes, another 45% from the state, and 10% from Federal resources. This pattern has been unchanged since the inception of public schools in the U.S. in the early 19th century.² Given that property values vary across urban, suburban and rural regions, and across states, resourcing schools has institutionalized inequity.

¹ Jeffri, J. (Ed.) 2007. Above Ground: Information on Artists III: Special Focus on New York City Aging Artists. Trustees of Teachers College Columbia University/Research Center for Arts and Culture

² <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474256366/why-americas-schools-have-a-money-problem>

Denial of the Cultural Diaspora

I want to mention another disappointment causing me alarm. This is not specific to any particular country or region but is a pervasive worldwide presence today. Moving from the U.S. to Australia has reinforced for me the global calamity of denying the palpable presence of the cultural diaspora. Our ignorance of the histories of indigenous cultures, and the dislike and distrust shown towards populations forced to immigrate from other places, is numbing our sense of humanity, and closing our eyes to our histories.

[Slide 2] Mary Sullivan (2017). "As I was Walking a Ribbon of Highway." Cast paper and mixed media. 106 x 45cm.

My reaction is to cite something personal because it is from our lived experience that we anchor our beliefs and values. My example is sourced from someone I know very well, my partner of more than 50 years, Mary Sullivan. She is an artist who makes paper and works it in many different ways. This is a recent piece, titled, "As I was Walking a Ribbon of Highway." It is a line from the folk singer Woody Guthrie's song from the 1940s, *This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land*. Mary created this piece at the time the Trump administration tried to implement travel bans on seven Muslim countries in early 2017 (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen). Her response was to represent the individual geographies of each of the seven countries, and to overlay them on ribbons of maps from middle America – a portrait of the diverse cultural reality of today. It is the creative and critical response of artists that turns my pessimism to optimism.

The Now: A Time of Opportunity

The positive and negative tensions of the times in which we live offer rich opportunities for asserting the importance of creative and critical ways of knowing, and for forging new alliances around the edges of mainstream theories and practices. Although histories privilege narratives, contemporary art

and cultural practices offer cutting edge perspectives for negotiating the complex realities we face in making visual arts practices meaningful. Earlier I said that as creative people, we implement ideas and actions that are transformative, adaptive, responsive, inclusive, accessible, and sustainable. I want to illustrate this point using a small sample of images and ideas that have shaped the past twenty years of my professional life. For me, they are compelling examples that continue to contribute to my understanding of the changing purposes and practices of visual arts, and their potential educational and cultural impact.

Visual Thinking: Dialogue with Artists

[Slides 3-4] Rashad Alakbarov. (2007). Looking at Two Cities from One Point of View

This is an installation by Azerbaijan artist, Rashad Alakbarov, exhibited in the 2007 Venice Biennale. The work is an assemblage of boxes, bottles and other materials arranged in a way that when the course of light changes, two different shadows are cast resulting in two different types of information. From one view the result suggests New York city. The other view of the same materials suggests we are looking at Istanbul. The data stays the same, but the interpretation changes. This experience is similar to what happens when we interpret data in our increasingly data-driven lives. However, as this art installation implies, in its raw form, data remains inert until acted upon and transformed into a form we can understand. Data are dumb—much like any material an artist uses to give form to ideas. This process is the same for any data, be they numbers, words, pictures, pigments or pixels. Everyday, we transform data into information that is useful. The reality is that data are alive. However, the same data can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on cultural convention or personal perspective. Understanding this principle opens

up very productive conversations between scientists, who believe progress leads to change, and artists, who assert, change leads to progress.

[Slide 5] Mark Tansey. (1986). The Pleasure of the Text

One of the most tangible achievements of postmodern theorists was to introduce new ways of thinking, and hence, new ways of seeing. Postmodernism was a genuine effort to critique assumptions underlying modernity and the invasive constraints of the Western canon. The structures that classified, ordered, and controlled how knowledge was seen and studied were shaken from their dichotomies, hierarchies, and typologies. Yet there was a surprising coherence evident among this conceptual collapse as theory was seen to be a part of practice; form was content; thought was action; mind was body; and science was art. Mark Tansey seems to suggest that when we look beneath systems and structures and hold them up to scrutiny, there may not be much supporting them. Perhaps we should stop and examine the foundation of our knowledge because it may well be an illusion. This is precisely what Linda Nochlin suggested in her 1971 essay, "Why have there been no great women artists?"

[Slide 6] "You Don't Solve Problems, You Surround Them."

This is a quote from the American feminist, Gloria Steinem I heard on Public Radio in the mid 1980s. Her response to the question, 'How do you solve problems?' was especially perceptive because it emphasized how non-linear our everyday cognition really is. This image shows me, standing in the National Gallery of Australia, looking at an exhibition of the Irish-American artist, Sean Scully. I had travelled to Canberra to visit the museum but was not aware of the exhibitions on show. It was a cold day and I did not have a coat. I visited a second-hand clothing store in search of a jacket and bought a football jumper. When I visited the exhibition, it seemed I became a Sean Scully painting. While standing in front of the work I realized all the ways I could have a conversation with the paintings as I surrounded them with my lived experience. Although

there were many paintings I had not seen before, this did not limit my capacity to connect with them. This is how we acquire knowledge— we are all active participants in creating it. We wear what we know on our sleeves, and our knowledge and awareness changes as continually as our clothing.

[Slide 7] Boris Curatolo Rasines. (2004). Sweet Spot.

This sculpture was made by a former master's student and was part of an exhibition exploring visual metaphor. On seeing this sculpture in the gallery, I was struck by the many references it made to how I was thinking about ways to integrate the research methodologies of the arts and sciences, as well as interdisciplinary curricula. The shadow of the sculpture presents a traditional view of integrating different elements using a Venn diagram of overlapping circles. This is a useful way to show what is common and what is unique when three elements are combined. However, reducing ideas in this way often oversimplifies what otherwise might be complex.

The sculpture, however, reminds me of what happens when different systems are effectively integrated. The sculpture occupies physical space, and we can see how a line in space both encloses and opens up the form at the same time as the direction changes. As John Dewey reminds us, experience is a dynamic process that continually changes. I will return to this idea later, but keep this image in mind – both the object and the shadow.

[Slide 8] Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts

When I was completing the manuscript for the first edition of Art Practice as Research in 2003-04 I was looking for a suitable cover image. I had exhibited and installed several Streetworks in New York City and one piece seemed especially appropriate. It was made from an old encyclopedia I found – my streetworks mostly begin with things retrieved from the streets. Being a book of formal knowledge, the encyclopedia was well suited to the questions I was asking about how we come to know things. An accidental visit by a dragonfly

that died in our apartment was the right touch of realism to insert into the altered book. The title, *Object Knowledge*, was a nice reference to knowledge as words, images and objects. I later installed the piece on the bookshelves of the main Reading Room of the New York Public Library. My streetworks are always returned to the street in a way that references their past life as an object and carries a brief message about their new life as an artwork.

About two weeks later I received a postcard in the mail, which read, "Hello Streetworks, I enjoyed my time in the New York Library and was checked out by a nice young couple from in Murray Hill." It was signed, *The Dragonfly Book*. As I had no idea of the identity of the couple. But the image of the Streetwork seemed very appropriate to be used on a book about visual arts research and creating new forms of knowledge. I hoped that sometime in the future the book with the Streetwork image would reconnect and the 'real' object, which was somewhere out in the world. This happened a few years later, but that's another story. At the time, however, the idea that one never really knows what forms 'knowledge' takes, or what happens to knowledge once it is shared, intentionally or accidentally. This is what happens when we teach. That art, knowledge, and life can connect in multiple and often unseen ways is the thesis of the text, *Art Practice as Research*.

[Slide 9] And the story continues...

The Dynamics of Structure, Agency and Action

[Slide 10] Self Similarity – Scale Free Structures

In theorizing studio art practice as a form of research it was of critical importance to affirm the central source of the artistic impulse to create, yet to be conscious of the enduring uncertainty about how this happens. Visual arts have no singular function because art can be called on to do just about anything – and this is a good thing. Art is masterful at shape shifting and form fitting. Conventional means of argument, methods of persuasion, and models of

prediction see uncertainty, contradiction and unanticipated outcomes as liabilities. Research that seeks causal explanations aligned with acceptable levels of confidence is perceived to be robust and conclusive – and this is a good thing. But artists see uncertainty, contradiction and unanticipated outcomes as liabilities as assets. Artistic outcomes and cultural capital are no less dependent on peer assessment. Context dependent practices are not easily reduced to singular metrics, yet have the capacity to be rigorously mapped, analyzed and visualized to render a more complete picture. A key argument made in the text, *Art Practice as Research*, which I continue to assert, is that the only viable base from which visual arts can continue to respond begins in the studio.

The structure that describes this dynamic was sourced from chaos theory and fractal geometry – it is the idea of self-similarity. I first observed this in a market in southern France – the wonderful Romanesque cabbage, also known as Romanesco broccoli. Self-similarity is a structure that describes how things can be simple and complex at the same time and are infinitely expandable and variable. For me, this describes core attributes of visual arts, and human learning. For artists, the studio is a place one is born into, when the hard wiring that helps shape who we are awaits the formative cues necessary to help us flourish. It's where our capabilities of thinking, making and doing merge amid the interactive and messy processes that give rise to our actions, aspirations and explorations. The studio is a metaphorical place of flexibility and adaptability that is chaotic in confirming and destabilizing our predictions of what makes sense, and where chance occurrence nudges up alongside constraints as we translate, transform and transition to a state of momentary understanding. Understanding visual encounters and experiences is a dynamic process of change that travels in every direction and dimension.

[Slide 11, 12, 13] Thinking in a Medium, Thinking in a Language; Thinking in a Context

These diagrams describe how the concept of self-similarity is used as a framework for thinking about studio practice and the distinctive nature of visual cognition. Individual dispositions and capabilities take flight through our thinking, which we do with our head, hands, and heart in the many sites and situations where we make things.

The Braided Dynamics of Visual Arts Practices

This slide [14] gives a sense of the interactive relationship that can unfold once prompted by what artists make. Interpretation and meaning making are framed by theories and contexts and the everchanging relationship among the artist, artwork, viewer, and the setting. These relationships all become agencies of action and reaction that can spin the art experience into all manner of places. This continually expanding process of networked connections is a loose choreography in the search for meaning and it is less structured than it appears in this animation.

This version [15] describes one way to think about how visual arts studio practices can open up conversations with paradigms of research that are grounded in empirical methods, interpretative traditions, and critical processes.

This slide [16] highlights the relational characteristics of cognitive dispositions found across disciplines and the distinctive transformational nature of visual arts knowing. These habits of mind also emphasize the shape shifting capacity of visual arts to assume all of these modalities if the purpose warrants it. This fluidity means that visual arts are ideal candidates for interdisciplinary collaboration.

I will talk in more detail about this slide [17] shortly with reference to a new cross-college collaboration in multimedia digital design.

These iconic images and ideas have shaped my understanding of ways of affirming the importance of creative and critical ways of knowing that are central to visual arts. Let me add an example that echoes many of these attributes. It is a structure that astounded me when I first experienced it on my return to Sydney a few weeks ago.

[Slides 18, 19, 20] One Central Park, Sydney.

One Central Park is a major statement about urban renewal, people and place. It is a collaborative project involving architectural firms, design and engineering consultants, experts in ecology and sustainability, and iconoclastic artists, among many others. It is a 'living' building where accepted views and practices are radically altered, thereby creating new ways to connect space, place, people and purpose. One Central Park is an exploration of community revitalization, a reference to past indigenous and colonial histories, a high-rise residential building, a commercial hub, a public park, and an art installation. And who knows that else it might grow into. Although I was aware of this development, I had not directly experienced it. This is a place where the floor is also the wall; a roof is without walls; the outside becomes the inside; the sun is harnessed to reflect and deflect light to dispel shadows; growth and decay coexist on a daily basis; and the human scale is referenced to a squiggly edge. Like effective interdisciplinary practices, what you get is not what you usually see.

4. Professional Identity: Curriculum as Cultural and Creative Capital

[Slide 21] Digital Multimedia Design

In 2014 the Penn State School of Visual Arts had an opportunity to collaborate with the Colleges of Information Science and Technology (IST) and

Communications (COMM), and PSU World Campus to develop an online multidisciplinary undergraduate degree in digital design.³

[Slide 22] DMD Curriculum Structure: Three Colleges — One Program

The online digital media setting brings together creative learning capabilities in art and design (SoVA), with programming and design competencies in digital technology (IST), and communication skills in presenting purposeful ideas (Communications)

SoVA took on the responsibility of designing the curriculum structure because a key component to link the three colleges was design. What subsequently took shape was the development of an undergraduate online Bachelor of Design in Digital Multimedia Design (DMD). Design was defined this way:

Design is a creative and critical practice that enables individuals and communities to deal with change

Design is a means by which we react to contexts and work out a plan where ideas are hatched and innovative and strategic actions taken.

Designers respond to problems that are complicated and to address them requires research, collaboration and interdisciplinary thinking.

The teaching and learning practices embedded in the DMD curriculum are flexible yet focused. A core learning principle is that a curriculum is a learning space where knowledge is not only delivered, but it is created and critiqued in a studio context. This curriculum approach is well suited to applying a range of learning principles that have more educational power when they are integrated.

[Slide 23] Interdisciplinary Curriculum: The Edge Effect and Pathways

³ Sullivan, G. & Collins, M. (2018). Annual Report 2017-18: Bachelor of Design in Digital Multimedia Design (Online). Unpublished Report, College of Arts and Architecture, The Pennsylvania State University, August 21, 2018.

The curriculum incorporates concepts and content from three academic units based on the principle of “integration with integrity.” This emphasizes the distinctive communities of inquiry yet allows different content areas to be integrated as modules, units, and course sequences to achieve a coherent yet diverse curriculum footprint. Students follow self-identified curriculum pathways selected from supporting, additional, and general education course clusters across the three colleges. These are starting points for students to identify preferred areas of interest and career options.

[Slide 24] Project Models

A core feature of the DMD degree is the emphasis within the colleges on distinctive approaches to learning. Each college has an identifiable format of inquiry embracing problem-based learning (IST), project-based learning (COMM) and arts-based learning (SoVA/A&A). These methods are integrated in collaborative capstone projects midway through degree, and research capstone projects completed at the conclusion of the degree. x

[Slide 25] A Budget is a Curriculum Statement in Fiscal Form

Penn State’s World Campus has low infrastructure costs, which means tuition can be kept low to increase accessibility and equity. The university also has a revenue sharing model in place so academic units that offer online courses and programs receive a share of the revenue. SoVA has been active in building an online portfolio of courses over the years. The introduction of the new DMD online degree and the growing enrollment has increased the amount of revenue SoVA generates online. From 2014 through 2017 the average net return per year was just over \$200K. This revenue doubled over the past year as a result of the DMD. With enrollment meeting market expectations in the first five semesters, and on target to accommodate 350-400 students across the four-year degree, the revenue return to the College from SoVA’s online courses and degrees is estimated to be \$1.2M by 2020.

This fiscal emphasis may appear to contradict my criticism of the corporate takeover of public education I talked about earlier. And this impact is certainly being felt in higher education. However, there are five points I want to emphasize that help me sleep at night:

1. There is collaborative integrity within the digital design curriculum that relies on the distinctive contribution of multiple disciplines.
2. With the recent accreditation of the DMD degree by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), Penn State University has accepted and approved the idea that the 'digital' art and design studio is a place of learning that has a unique role to play in other disciplines.
3. The DMD is a Bachelor of Design degree whose academic home is the School of Visual Arts. The curriculum responsibility for designing the degree, facilitating the collaboration, and implementing it online through World Campus has been an excellent exercise where the School of Visuals has been the institutional leader.
4. By pursuing the idea of the continually evolving and expanding nature of visual arts and design in an environment that is responsive to change, the future financial stability of the School of Visual Arts has been secured.
5. This is why it was a good time to retire.

Thank you.