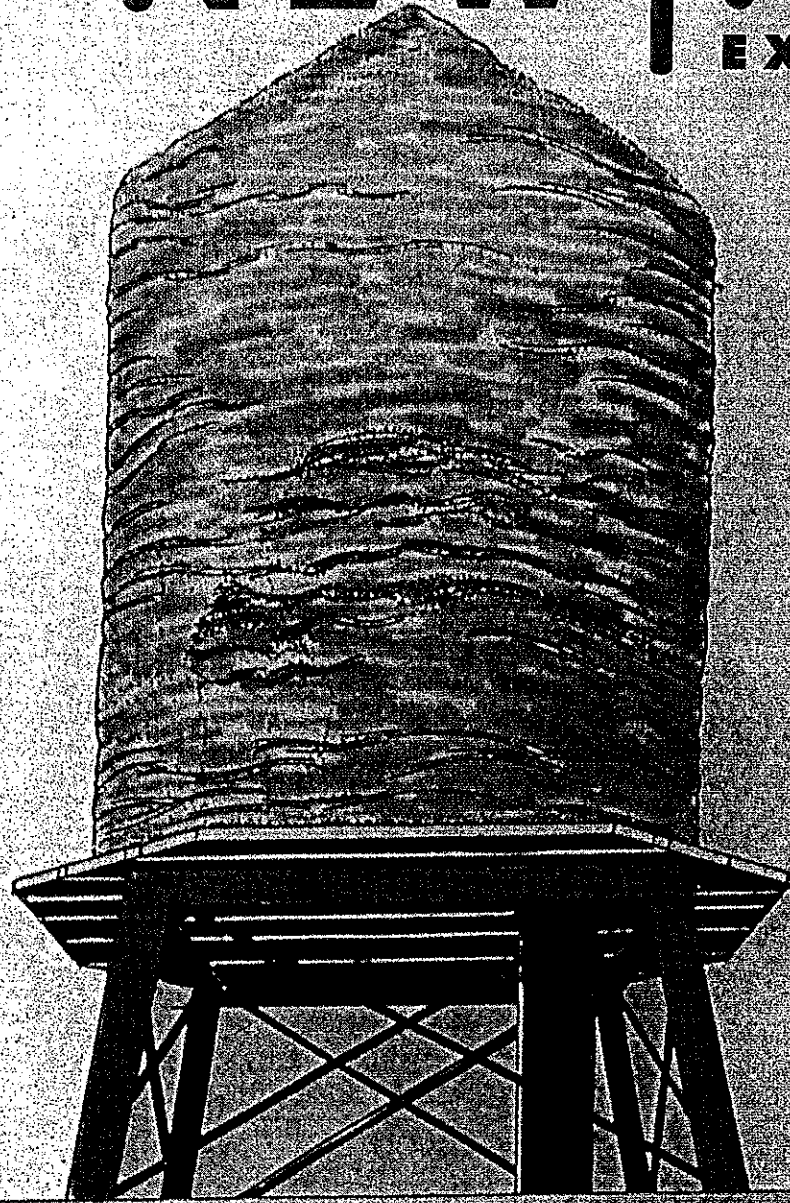


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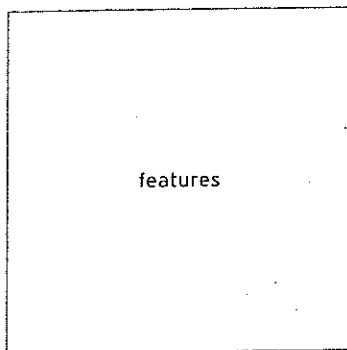
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above:
Raphael
The Three Graces, 1505-06.
Oil on panel, 7" x 7". See page 22.



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A heightened interest in interactivity—a situation in which two parties are mutually engaged—is permeating both aesthetic and pedagogical theory and practice as a way to present alternatives to top-down, one-to-many communication systems.
by Dan Collins

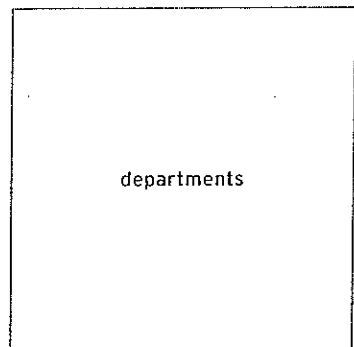
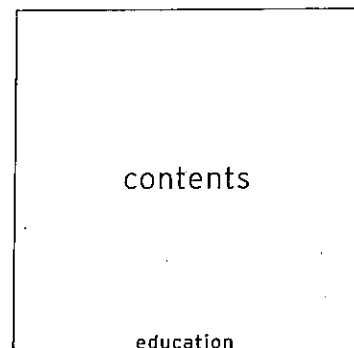
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All images show students enrolled in the M.F.A.I.A. program at Goddard College, courtesy of former participants.



breaking out of the box: the subversive potential of interdisciplinary arts

BY BEVERLY NAIDUS

A young college student is trying to decide on her major. She sits with her advisor who impatiently asks her to fill out a form. She tries to explain to him that she loves too many things: revisioning history with a feminist lens, looking at memory and human behavior, studying how oppression functions, communicating, making images, telling stories, dancing, performance, rocks, bugs, trees. . . He interrupts her abruptly. "That's enough. You just need to put something down on this form. You can change your mind later" (thinking to himself "and then it won't be my problem"). She hesitates and then says, "Art, it will have to be art—then I can make art about all the things that interest me." "Fine," he says relieved, sending her out the door, form in hand. "And good luck."

Almost three decades ago, when the substance of art was exploding out of frames, off walls and pedestals, and into the street and all sorts of alternative venues, this young woman was trying to squeeze the breadth of her interests into a bureaucratic box. Has the traditional academic world changed much in all those years? My career experience in academia may provide one answer to that question, or bring up more questions for the reader.

In the mid-'80s I was hired by an art department at a large state university to teach, among other more traditional subjects, the ambiguously labeled genre of "intermedia." Despite the supportive allies who had hired me, it was clear soon after I arrived on campus that I had colleagues who saw my teaching as subversive. Breaking the boundaries between artistic disciplines was bad enough, but asking students to think deeply about the world and their place in it as part of their artistic practice was definitely not the tradition of this particular art department.

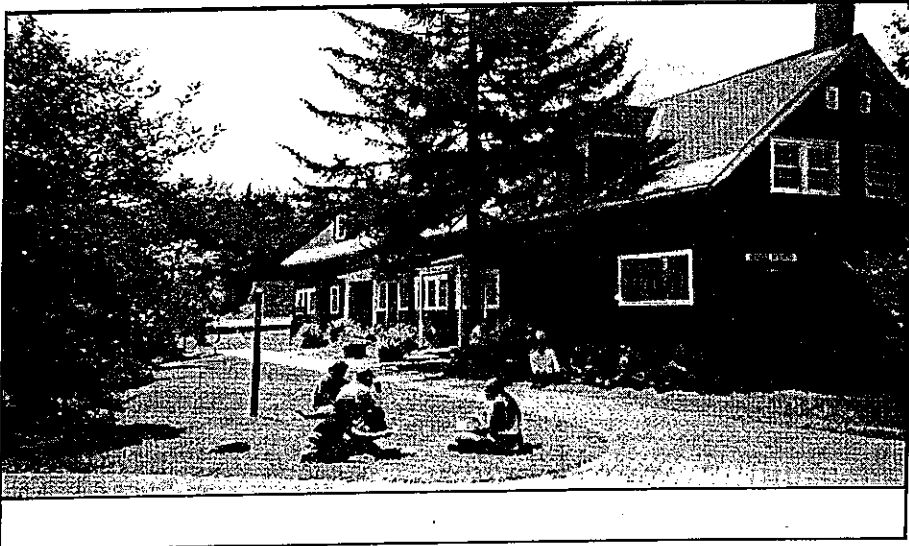
The students came into the intermedia class thirsty. Many of them spoke of being damaged or wounded by studio classes where they were asked to focus on very limited subject matter with very limited tools. Some of them had lost their creative passion and came to my class as a last hope. They had found the focus on the technical and formal aspects of art making stultifying, and were excited when they heard about the conceptual focus of my class. We explored all sorts of new genres, from artist's books to community-based public projects, and the students were encouraged to find subject

matter that was meaningful to them. While formal issues were not neglected in my classes, we did discuss the controversies around "universal" standards. We explored ways of measuring the success of a piece by looking at the artist's intention and the public context of the particular work. We discussed how all art is political, and what the social responsibility of an artist might be. We looked at how new genres have created new ways of interacting with an audience, and explored the transformative power of art as a tool for healing and/or social change. These classes were quite popular.

After a year or two a new chair of the art department asked me to develop a concentration in intermedia. Over a three-year period I met with chairs of all the programs in the art college (art, music, dance, theater, and film). Everyone was very supportive and excited about the possibility of this new program. Students would be given the opportunity to design their own interdisciplinary art majors, combining existing classes from all over the art college, and they would be required to take some courses in cultural theory, and ethnic and women's studies. After many meetings with the art department's curriculum committee I put the proposal for a new major in intermedia forward for a vote among the art department faculty.

Although the chair had recognized the enthusiasm among my students, it became clear that not everyone in the department celebrated the goals of my proposed program. In fact some faculty saw it as a threat to everything they believed in as artists and teachers. They accused the program of producing dilettantes, saying that without rigorous training in one medium the students would be making very low quality work. One colleague said that studio artists had no business studying so much theory. I explained to her that students would not understand the discourse at national conferences, much less among their peers, without this kind of training. She then said, in exasperation, "Well, that's just a trend." One colleague said that the program should not exist in the art department at all, but when asked where he saw a better fit in the university, he had no answer. After over 40 of my colleagues voted against the new program I struggled to understand their fears.

I wondered if it all came down to money, and whether they were afraid that the intermedia concentration would steal funds and students from their individual domains in the art department. Although this was probably a



“Interdisciplinary” has become a fashionable buzzword in some places, but there is also limited understanding of what the concept means.

valid concern given limited university funds for art programs, in the end, I think, the major threat was that students in the intermedia program would be asking questions that these instructors could not answer and that fundamentally did not interest them. There are many art teachers who have never learned a conceptual approach to art, and who have never engaged their students with the process of finding one's creative voice. To such teachers, the traditional canon of art, rooted in the methodology of form and technique, is all that can be taught, and an interdisciplinary approach to the arts is anathema. At this particular university many of the faculty prided themselves on being throw-backs, for believing in the classical principles of art rooted in nineteenth-century ideals, and made fun of art schools filled with “fashionable people pretending to make art.” Unfortunately I could not convince my more narrow-minded colleagues that the study of interdisciplinary arts has its own methods and rigors and that it implies new criteria for evaluating work.

It was hard to thrive in such a harsh environment, despite the rewards of working with so many students who were passionate about experimentation, exploration, questioning, and pushing the boundaries of what they understood as art. In the years since I left that tenured position and that part of the country (for reasons unassociated with my job), I have been a finalist for teaching positions in many art departments across the nation. I have been witness to many battles between what some are calling the old guard and new guard. The old guard has been described as standing for the values of traditional aesthetics. It is hard to generalize about the new guard, but for the most part they are weaving together media and strategies for making art that challenge Modernist ideology. Many of the new guard were and are influenced by social movements of the 1960s and '70s and see their work connecting to feminist, activist, community-based, and conceptual art.

Recently I was invited to a new state college as a finalist for their first position in the arts. They advertised themselves as innovative and interdisciplinary. During my first interview I was asked to propose an interdisciplinary course that would be suitable for undergraduates. I suggested that if the students were interested in the local water crisis we could develop a course around that topic. Students would start their study by first drawing pictures of

water (learning some very traditional, formal skills) and looking at art-historical renditions of the same. Then they would study the crisis as reported in the newspaper, looking carefully at the photographic imagery describing the threat to water sources in the area. They would make their own photographs, write stories or poems, and create narratives with the imagery and text found in the media. Next they would study the geology of the water table and create metaphorical sculptures that examined their concerns about the disappearance of fresh water aquifers. Lastly they could interview members of the local community about their feelings regarding the crisis and create audio pieces. The public would be invited into a space on campus where all the various pieces of the project could be heard or seen. The students could facilitate a public dialogue on the topic for that event.

Many members of the hiring committee were thrilled with this interdisciplinary approach to teaching art, but they were not in the majority. It seemed that in seeking an “interdisciplinary artist” most of the faculty were really looking for someone to illustrate their lectures with slides relevant to the topic they were covering in their classes. “Interdisciplinary” has become a fashionable buzzword in some places, but there is also limited understanding of what the concept means.

My first experiences in interdisciplinary thinking came from teaching outside of academia. For four years I worked as an artist/teacher in several museums in New York City. I got a job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to work with high-school students, facilitating studio workshops and discussions about American, African, Oceanic, and European Art. For those students I created a curriculum that combined history, anthropology, political science, media literacy, cultural theory, and studio practice. We examined why the art was made, from where the art came, how it arrived in the museum, and how we experienced it in that public space. We compared “high” art to popular culture and looked at the value systems revealed by the museum's art versus those communicated by contemporary images in advertising. The studio work involved making pieces that revealed the students' value systems. To start with key questions that revealed meaning and values became the touchstone of my interdisciplinary teaching. I used this strategy for facilitating workshops at museums throughout the city.

In many ways, we are discovering that interdisciplinary art is really non-disciplinary.



There are a few academic institutions that are breaking new ground in the interdisciplinary arena. Among them is the long-distance, low-residency M.F.A. program in Interdisciplinary Arts (M.F.A.I.A.) at Goddard College in Vermont, where I now teach. The M.F.A.I.A. began accepting students in 1997. It was created by Danielle Boutet, an artist/philosopher from Montreal, in collaboration with some other artist/educators. Boutet recognized the need for an M.F.A. that would attract artists trained in many different media. The M.F.A.I.A. goes beyond the traditional formal concerns associated with the M.F.A. degree. Grounded in the progressive educational philosophy of other Goddard College programs, the M.F.A.I.A. is based on a self-designed curricula and individualized teaching. The Goddard process was inspired by the radical and visionary work of the educator and philosopher John Dewey. He emphasized that education must be made personally meaningful by active "doing" in the world, as well as by academic study. The faculty in the M.F.A.I.A. program are called advisors. They collaborate with students rather than operate in a hierarchical, authoritarian mode. The advisors spend more time focusing on the integral development of the artist/learner than on defining the boundaries of the canon.

During the three years I have been an advisor for the M.F.A.I.A. my students have included an accomplished Shakespearean actor and voice teacher from New York City who is developing installations and performance pieces about body image; a successful composer and survivor of the commercial music world of Los Angeles and New York who is now teaching full-time while producing sound sculptures about the Holocaust; a pioneer of digital art on the West Coast who is developing a Web-based practicum for artists; a photographer who has shifted her art practice outside of the dark room and is making text and images about environmental illness and infertility; a video-performance-installation artist in Korea who is developing work about intercultural marriages and the American military presence in Korea; a street-puppet theater artist from Argentina who is creating performances and artist's books about the Mothers of the Disappeared; a painter/writer who is exploring white identity as part of her fight against racism; and a performance artist with a deep spiritual practice who paints the interiors of people's homes as a way of healing the traumas in their lives.

One of the challenges we face at Goddard is defining our "standards" in relation to interdisciplinary art. Each semester we examine a student's work in relation to this, or-to his or her intentions and the context in which the work is placed. We ask students if the media they are using are appropriate to the content of their work. We ask them who their audience is and if they feel that their work will reach their chosen audience. If students are traditionally trained in one discipline and want to expand their practice further, the advisors help them develop the courage to cross into media where they may have no training. Students are either encouraged to get technical training with their new tools, or to find collaborators with the skills they need to accomplish a certain goal. In many ways, we are discovering that interdisciplinary art is really non-disciplinary. Many of our students make art that is no longer concerned with disciplinary considerations, but rather with other aspects of art: its social change or personal change potential, its meaning, or process.

What is the subversive and progressive potential of interdisciplinary art? We live in a world where information is increasingly compartmentalized. Negotiating the various compartments with their specialized codes has become both intimidating and alienating. Although it sometimes appears that the dominant culture rewards specialists, there are definite benefits to knowing how to think critically and creatively about a wide variety of subjects. Like practitioners of alternative medicine who try to heal by looking at the whole person, interdisciplinary artists look at complex, multi-layered issues using many tools and strategies. Interdisciplinary artists tend to express ideas and feelings in ways that are relevant to their communities. By raising questions and probing for answers, the potential for interdisciplinary art to shift public consciousness about, for example, a water crisis or the trauma of environmental illness is enormous. Rather than squeezing our interests into boxes, interdisciplinary art allows us to make interconnections between seemingly disparate concerns, offering strategies for broadening and deepening our visions of the world. **NEW | ART**

Beverly Naidus is a practicing interdisciplinary artist who currently lives in the hills of western Massachusetts and is on the faculty of the M.F.A.I.A. program at Goddard College.