Intermedia: an introduction to the concept and it potential for creative production today.

Owen Smith

Intermedia was a concept first employed by writer, publisher, theorist, and artist Dick Higgins to describe the variable, often shifting, inter-disciplinary creative activities that he saw occurring between genres in the 1960s. Thus, the developing new hybrid forms of media such as those between graphics and poetry (concrete poetry), or between painting and theater (happenings) were for Higgins, intermedia. Intermedia is not a stable new form of new media, however. These fluid areas of experimental innovation were then, as they are now the territory of intermedia, but as these forms of exploration began to take a repeated singular form, they ceased being intermedia and became new genres or media. We have seen this historically in the development of new forms such as performance art, installation sculpture and sound art.

Although Higgins explained in his 1966 essay “Intermedia” that what he labeled as the intermedial approach was characteristic of the very best work then being produced, the term itself was taken from the 19th century writings of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Intermedia should also be seen as part of a process of creative innovation and question forming that spans the 20th century; from Dada and Marcel Duchamp, through John Cage and the Zen influenced arts of the 1950s into the variety of new forms and movements of the 1960s and 70s such as Happenings, Fluxus, Conceptual Art, Earth Art, Artists’ Books, Video Art and may others. In all of these historic forms, as well as in the more contemporary work presented here in this exhibition Intermedia, there can be discerned three formative questions:

What are the materials of art?
What is the relationship between the artist/work and the audience?
What are the processes of manipulation/creation available to the artist?

Higgins laid out a general generative process of exploration characteristic of Intermedia. He later developed this further in the conceptual approach he labeled “exemplativist,” in his essay "An Exemplativist Manifesto," and graphically depicted in the poster displayed in the exhibition, Five Traditions of Art History, an Essay. Two short passages are especially worthy of consideration:

Such works [intermedial or exemplativist works] cannot be ends in themselves. Instead they always participate in the ongoing process of sharing an experience. Among the criteria for evaluating such works must always be the efficiency and force of their suggestion and proposal. Since this processes not the single realization as the work, but the dialectic between any single realization and its alternatives. . . .

Our arts . . . seem always to involve some aspect of performance - we enact, we do, we perform or commit aesthetic acts. We commit an act of education when we teach or when we present our live manifestations. Even our most static works are the result of such acts and, thus, have a performance aspect. . . - the action of the artist . . . is always sensed in the work and so the work can never be a fixity. Like life itself, our works are impure- always the centers of emanations of experience.
As in the above passages, Higgins claimed, and the works in this exhibition tend to bear this out, that intermedial works were an expression of an attitude, or worldview. Objects, books or experiences might be generated in the creative process, but fundamentally they were acts, not things. The works become instructions (sometime even literally) to do, make and think. Thus language or the operations of language are often a key element and such works are both a manifestation of direct participation and a mechanism for engagement. These processes are, however, simultaneously enacted without predetermined definitive characteristics or goals, in a kind of infinite play of possibilities and substitutions, thus they are fundamentally experimental, fragmentary, ephemeral and unfinished.

The nature of these intermedial explorations has often been suggested to be limited to considerations of just media, when in fact the most critical nature of this reevaluation is not media driven but a rejection of media determinism, and more broadly seen as a rejection of static frames and perceptions. Instead of seeing the explorations of Intermedial artists as media centric, they are best understood as a fundamental reconsideration of cognitive processes and their social extensions into cultural frames such as evaluative processes, cultural structures and meaning systems.

Intermedia should be seen as part of the aesthetic and conceptual tradition sometimes referred to as the Duchamp-Cage aesthetic. Although much has been written about this, sometimes now referred under the term relational aesthetics, there are several general, yet formative, aims and concerns that shaped both the nature and the form of all intermedial works produced. These include but are not limited to the following:

- A rejection of the notion that art is first and foremost a process of production that creates a unique object.
- A stress on the non-hierarchical nature of the world outside of human impositions.
- Eschewing the role of the artist as special and as the principal focus of the work and/or its appreciation.
- An emphasis on the primary significance of process, change and duration in the creation and presentation of works.

and

- Discarding the significance of boundaries between types of works through the use of new medias, intermedia and even non-media.

In the variety of works presented in this exhibition the artists “occupy” new spaces, and their parallel new roles exemplified in the works ceases to be located in terms of media or materiality and instead takes a position somewhere between – between thought and deed, between process and product, and between subject and object. Another aspect of this split role for the artist was indicated by the artist Ben Patterson when he wrote that, "...the central function of the artist [should] be a duality of discoverer and educator: discoverer of the varying possibilities for selecting from environmental stimuli specific percepts and organizing these into significant perceptions, and concurrently as an educator, training a public in the ability to perceive in newly discovered patterns." Thus for Patterson, and many artists that helped shape the Intermedial tradition as well as the artists presented in this show, the artist/musician/poet/technologist is no longer a person tied to a particular form or existence, but becomes an explorer of perception and a public educator who moves between normative categories and perceptions in a process of discovery, provocation and communication.
Notes:
2. Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p. 159

Originally written for the web catalog of Without Boarders at: