designing, juggling, balancing and performing:
the Circus Oz Living Archive Collaboration

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Abstract

Increasingly within the realm of research and creative practice, collaboration, as an entity and a methodology, is being positioned as a necessity in the search for innovation. Underpinning this is the belief and expectation that the diversity and multiple perspectives that are integral to a collaboration will enable innovation and the discovery of something 'new' or of greater relevance in application. Enacting interdisciplinary collaborations that integrate both academic and external organisations is a complex undertaking. Designing a research program and methods for shared understanding is essential if the benefits of the collaboration is to be realised. This essay reflects on one of the strategies being utilised by the Circus Oz Living Archive project team as we work towards the collaborative realisation of the project outcome.

Increasingly within the realm of research and creative practice, collaboration, as an entity and a methodology, is being positioned as a necessity in the search for innovation. Underpinning this is the belief and expectation that the diversity and multiple perspectives that are integral to a collaboration will enable innovation and the discovery of something 'new' or of greater relevance in application. For those of us engaged in academic research, a collaboration may take various forms. It may be a collaboration across different disciplines or between different project partners such as the academy, industry and/or community. In any form of collaboration there are many different potential issues that will influence the process and outcomes of the collaboration, as there are equally many different contexts for innovation and contribution from a project outcomes.

Over the past five years I have been engaged in numerous research collaborations. Typically these have been interdisciplinary; few have been within the frame of only one discipline domain, and none have involved researchers from within the same field of practice or expertise. On a few occasions design explorations have been the central project focus, at others design has been just one disciplinary contributor as the project team has sought to explore or resolve an identified problem or proposition. My engagement in these projects has resulted in my understanding that collaboration is a much more complicated entity than many give it credit for being. Understanding and engaging with the socio-historic politics, and the pre or misconceptions, or assumptions that are present when disciplines and practitioners embark on such an undertaking is essential in the design of a collaborative project. It is also essential in the ongoing management of a research project including the communication between team members.

Image 1

The Circus Oz Living Archive project (*Living Archive)* is an example of such a project, and one that I am currently involved in. Funded within the Australian Research Council Linkage Program, this project is a collaboration between a circus, a performing arts museum, an arts funding organisation and two universities. The listed Chief and Partner Investigators are from 12 or more different disciplinary domains. This project is a rich mix where science, the arts, design, performance and cultural studies, regularly meet as the project team endeavours to envisage, design and eventually realise a digital living archive. What has become apparent over the past 12-months is that even in a collaboration that has intense good will and acceptance with regard to the interdisciplinary nature of the collaboration, tensions of difference still exist. Addressing and most often embracing this tension of difference, and using it as a creative opportunity rather than a destructive one, has been our method to the challenges to date. In this essay I will reflect on the experience of collaboration amidst such disciplinary and contextual difference in practice; including some of the joys and challenges, and the subsequent strategies and the learning that continue to evolve in conjunction with the project discoveries. My intention is that through my reflections on this one project, to consider what it might mean for our broader understanding of design collaboration in practice.

The Project

The catalyst for the *Living Archive* project was two fold. Firstly there was Circus Oz's ambition to transform and make more accessible their existing video archive that documents thirty-three years of the circus's performance history; and secondly there was a desire to rethink existing paradigms of contemporary performance particularly in relation to time, authorship and place, and how this can be transformed through technology. Based on these ambitions the proposition emerged that it would be possible through the design of a new way of engaging with an archive, to realise new conceptions and experiences of circus performance. These project ambitions raise many questions and challenges, and they have been used to frame the project objectives and the design of the team and various types of expertise that are required to realise it.

This is a grand and complex ambition for a research project and one that has potential for confusion and confrontation as the members and representatives of the various organisation and disciplinary domains work together. Conscious of this the team has adopted an open and diverse approach to the project methodology and methods. The aim being to recognise the various conceptions of research and rigour or relevance to each of the knowledge fields and traditions, whilst also communicating the research progress in ways that are relevant to the various research partners from Circus Oz, the Australia Council, the Performing Arts Museum in Melbourne, Australia, and the Australian Research Council who funded the project. In an attempt to build bridges across points of difference and assist the team to be transparent and respectful, social media and other associated digital collaboration and communication devices are being used to make all information open to the team and where appropriate, to the public.

Addressing the needs and expectations of the various researchers within a project as complex as the *Living Archive* is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon within design research projects. As the field of design research transforms from being utilising a predominantly individual creative practice approach to design research, to embracing the complexity of applied interdisciplinary design investigations integrating the academy and industry and community. It could be argued that in this way, design research is transforming and beginning to model the practices of design in commercial practice, but this would be a simplistic interpretation of this transformation and what it will mean for the academy and external contexts over time. The disciplinary intersections of research projects such as this, challenge us to design new ways of undertaking research, and for design researchers, the development of a clearer understanding of what design is, how it is practiced, and its contribution to society and industry.

Defining Disciplinarity

As the focus of this discussion is on the dynamics of interdisciplinary collaboration in practice, it is essential to clarify what I mean when I use the terms discipline and interdisciplinary.

Across the literature there are numerous definitions of what a discipline is and what role disciplinary frameworks play in enabling our knowledge of the world. Underpinning much of the discussion is the understanding that a discipline is the manifestation of a community's shared interest in a topic or field of interest and there is agreement that particular often 'proven' methods are the most appropriate way to investigate it.

As McDonell (2000) argues, a discipline is a 'knowledge culture (that) comes with, indeed is constituted in, a form of language, a custom of practice, an economy of means, a structure of power, a rule of justice, an archive of narratives of identity and tradition' (in Somerville & Rapport 2000, p. 27). In this way a discipline is realised through language and practices, has its own methods of reward, of power and justice, and an identity, which are typically grounded in tradition. A discipline is the realisation of a dynamic tension between certainty and transformation. In one breath a discipline is perceived as solid and is focused on deepening its roots of knowing, on the other side it is dynamic and in action, driven by its methods and the search for new discoveries. Certainty and the unknown working side by side, being measured and validated according to the boundaries of the field, and it is these boundaries that eventually become the canons and the norms of the knowledge domain.

Integral to a discipline is the ability to communicate objectively 'in such a way that anybody in possession of certain tools can understand it, anywhere and at any time. That is because within a discipline receiving is confirmed' (Finkelthorpe 2001, p. 4-5). It is the consistency of methods and the building of the canon, that enables members of a discipline community to understand and create a shared meaning grounded in common values, methods, validation required in meaning making. It is in this way that disciplines consolidate and subsequently the challenges of mixed disciplinary collaborations can become manifest. Ranges of terms are used to describe the mixing of disciplines in projects. These include inter, cross, multi or trans disciplinary.

The following are definitions grounded in the work of Richard Meeth (1978), and are based on a survey of definitions of the literature that reveal subtle differences across different interpretations.

Crossdisciplinary: viewing or observing one discipline from the perspective of another. Eg. The politics of literature or art history—a field of its own and cross-disciplinary.

Multidisciplinary: several disciplines focussed on one issue—the juxtaposing disciplines each offer a different perspective on a common theme. This is done with the intention to integrate or inter-relate ideas.

Interdisciplinary: like multidisciplinary the focus is on integration, but to a deeper level. Relating part to part, part to whole, whole to part.

Transdisciplinary: beyond the disciplines—where inter and multidisciplinarity start with the disciplines, transdisciplinarity starts with the problem and seeks out the disciplines needed to address the issues.

In the *Living Archive* project we have adopted 'interdisciplinary' as the term to describe the disciplinary mix and the ambition that through investigating the boundaries between these as a means to realising the project outcomes.

Undertaking an interdisciplinary collaboration does by its very nature, challenge the certainties of any one of the participating disciplines. The boundaries between different domains such as

performance studies and computer science become challenged when you collaboratively seek to create something new. With this, it becomes essential that those participating in a project understand the differences as well as similarities, and develop methods and a language for enabling communication and the evolution of the research project.

Context and Expertise

As argued by Pestre (2003) disciplines are socio-political constructions that serve two purposes. Firstly they are committed to area of inquiry and ensuring the highest possible quality outcomes and secondly, they are committed to ensuring their own survival and position within the academy. Disciplines are fundamentally academic constructs that have minimal relevance outside of the academy. Educational institutions are structured on disciplines, but education in application such as in organisations or the community, disciplinary knowledge is transformed to become a profession, product or section within a larger entity.

According to Winch (2010) there are two dimensions to our classification of expertise:

1. subject expert—extremely knowledgeable of an academic subject (discipline)
2. practical activity—modes of mastery of an occupation, profession or activity

This classification of expertise and types of knowledge has interesting connotations for design and practice. For it assumes a distinct separation between knowledge of a subject and knowledge of a subject in practice, for the researchers coming from the fields of design and the creative and performing arts involved in this project, there is a certain amount of slippage between classifications one and two.

The *Living Archive* project is not only an interdisciplinary collaboration but it is also a collaboration between the academy, three arts organisations and a range of practitioners. In this way the project is not only engaging with different domains of knowledge, but also differing contexts for knowledge production, application and validation.

Fiona Doloughan (2002) has attempted to make sense of the intentions of research and the relationship between that intention and its application. She argues that 'ultimately at the core of the academic enterprise, is a search for knowledge within a reflective and systematic framework' (p.39) and to communicate the outcomes of the process of enquiry. Raising questions such as: *But what is communication and what form does it take? How does that relate to the field of inquiry, the methods and the intention?* In asking these questions Doloughan is arguing for the need for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse forms that research communication can take. That communication needs to be appropriate to the context of the field, the research audience and be aligned with 'the multi-modal nature of communication in the modern world' (p. 60). These are important issues when undertaking research projects and the more complex the project and its context and stakeholders, the more attention that needs to be applied to communication plans that will enable effective communication of the research intention and application of the outcomes. For example; *Is the research being undertaken as an academic investigation into some nature of knowing and action? Or is it being done to address an identified area of need or a problem?* The *Living Archive* project, is endeavouring to address both of these contexts for research application and contribution in theory and practice.

The *Spiegelvent*

Engaging the Circus Oz community is essential to the success of the *Living Archive*. Central to the initial project design were a series of seminars which were to function as both opportunities to collect data, gain feedback and gather more content for the *Living Archive* as it evolves. In this way the intention of the events was understood, as was the timing and the desired participants, but it was not until the project team began to design the first event, that we truly understood the

opportunity that such an event could be. Across the disciplines of the project team there are established methods for gathering human orientated data, and differing interpretations for what would constitute useful outcomes. For example, for the designers there was a desire to embrace a human centred approach that was participatory; for performance studies it was an opportunity to obtain clarity on details from the community about archival documentation; whereas for Circus Oz it was an important opportunity to engage with the company diaspora. As the team met and discussed the various possibilities it was essential that we designed an event that would meet the various needs of the researchers and organisations.

The event was scheduled to take place in Circus Oz's Spiegeltent. As we contemplated the environment and the objective to engage the community in ambition and proposition for a new kind of archive (one that included them and one that they could continue to use for their own specific needs) we realised that it was the implicit contrasts in the project that would be the most effective metaphor and creative framework for designing a participatory communication and engagement strategy. With this, the researchers went to and endeavoured in a small way, to perform in the circus.

Many of the elements of the project can be understood through a framework of a continuum. In particular we were interested in the possibilities between:

Form: Analogue—Digital
Person: Circus Performer—Researcher or Scientist
Time: Past—Present—Future

Through a framework of performance the community were invited to an event in the Speigletent where the *Living Archive* would be introduced to them. This event took place in May 2011 with 50 members of the broader Circus Oz community attending. A party or celebratory theme with catering and opportunity for friends to catch up was the theme. The research team adopted a persona of the research scientist clad in white coats we were easily identifiable within the Circus Oz fraternity (image 1). Using film and digital representations, we introduced them to project, to the ambition by the team and Circus Oz, to the team, and through a large format screening to elements of the archive. In conjunction with one of the more senior company members, a game was played with the audience based on one of his performances. This involved a 'supposed' random selection of videos accessed through a spinning barrel (a prop from one of the Circus acts), where the number of the ball equated to a video file in the archive and a piece of footage was shown. Many had never seen the video footage in the archive, and through this activity that which had been a series of individual memories, came alive.

Image 2

Image 3

In the second part of the evening people were able to watch videos on laptops that had been placed around the room. The researchers in their white coats roamed, listened, watched and had conversations with community members. Informally and observationally we began to understand the currency of the content of the video, and the possibilities of what the 'living' might ultimately mean for the project.

This was the first such event in the project. It marked phase one in how we would engage with the community at the heart of the project. This community included both the Circus Oz community, as well as the *Living Archive* research community. The relative neutrality of the theatricality of the event with our costumes and games, helped to provide a common ground through which we could position our respective methodologies and methods for undertaking research. We discovered and developed a shared language for what was taking place, and understood our respective contributions. For the industry partners it was a surprise, they had expected something far more 'academic' and were relieved to discover our dexterity as researchers. Team building across the project was one of the significant outcomes of the *Spiegelvent*.

Conclusion

The undertaking of interdisciplinary design collaborations is a rich area of design research in practice. The *Living Archive* project is an example of the rich possibilities of discovery and innovation that can occur through such an undertaking, and it is a project that acknowledges and embraces the challenges that come with this new territory of investigation. Underpinning our strategy for collaboration is a recognition of the power and diversity of language, actions and tradition. Designing in project protocols and communication opportunities to explore and embrace difference whilst also working towards a shared outcome is an important aspect of what is undertaken by the research team; and it is something that is in constant state of evolution; embracing the research context, its methods and modalities has been an important aspect of this. In particularly the concepts of performance and the carnivalesque; and although some in the team are more versed and experienced in these, they are the neutral points around and through which we can coalesce in the design and ultimate making of the *Living Archive*.

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