



Photograph by by Davina Gray

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Swimming in Different Waters, or Learning to Recontextualize Your Practice for Increased Opportunities

Cross-practice art work has become the norm amongst a number of artists but may appear a bit daunting if you haven't made the venture into a neighbouring creative field. If you are interested in working within another art field but are unsure of how to go about it, fear not, the water's not as murky as you might first have thought. This article will discuss what you need to know when you're thinking about taking your practice into a different context and what you might want to consider before you do.

Like any journey, creative or not, you'll need to

- **know where you've come from**
- **know where you're going**
- **and why**

And of course,

- **don't be afraid to ask for directions**

Sounds ridiculously simple I know, and it can be if you go about it in a relaxed manner and have some patience.

The first step is to **know where you've come from**. Sounds like just so much Zen meets Socrates, but nothing is more important. If you're interested in taking your current practice into another context, you'll need to be pretty clear on what it is you do, why you do it, what turns you on about it, and why you want to take it into a different sphere.

When I first moved to the UK in 2004 I was very comfortably an 'experimental composer and improviser.' I knew my stuff, I knew where I came from historically and I knew what I wanted to do and why. It was only after several people continued to tell me, 'You're a sound artist' that I decided to investigate beyond the cursory level what

exactly differentiated a sound artist from an experimental composer, which led to a whole new stage of growth in my own practice.

As a matter of fact, until that time I didn't have a 'practice' (a decidedly vis-art term) but rather, I had 'a portfolio'. And while I was actually creating installations then as an experimental composer that were quite similar to the ones I now make as a 'sound artist', I considered them 'electronic mobile compositions' ala Earle Brown and Alexander Calder. It was only after fully exploring the field of sound art in its own right that my own vocabulary expanded to allow me to describe my work as a 'practice' that took in concepts and ideas from not only late 20th century avant-garde composition and improvisation, but also visual artists, sculptures, and critical theorists. Once I became conversant with respect to both fields it was much easier to talk with artists, curators, funding bodies, etc. concerning my work.

This all brings me to my second point, **know where you're going**. Basic, right? But you would be surprised how many composers I know that just 'don't get' sound or visual art, at least not anything that's occurred post-Rothko, or how many visual artists I know who can't listen to music that doesn't have a beat or a melody. If this describes you, I would suggest that you lay aside how you think it 'should' be and attempt to approach the practice in question on its own terms, not on those you carry with you from your own area of expertise.



Photograph by by Allan Cynic

For example, I have a friend who actually does some pretty out-there work sonically but is still very much a 'composer'. His pieces are *PIECES*; they have a beginning, middle and end, and involve structure and shape and all the same concepts that could have easily described a Beethoven sonata from 200 or so years ago. Although his work sounds experimental (it's electronic), it's actually quite conservative. He doesn't 'get' sound art. According to him, it doesn't have 'structure', the artists don't pay attention to the 'quality' of the sounds, there's no 'development'. Of course the issue is that for many of the works he's describing, there isn't supposed to be structure, development, or 'quality' of the kind that he's looking for because many pieces of sound art are exploring completely different discourses than the one he's accustomed to working in – music. He's expecting sound art to be composition, and it's not, it's sound art.

Does this mean that you can't bring your own sensibilities and knowledge from your own practice with you? Of course not! As a matter of fact, what will make you innovative is the fact that once you have a sense for the two different cultures (because that's what we're talking about, creative cultures within/between practices) you'll have insights into both that those who only swim in their own waters could never have. But until you're able to see your own biases, it'll be that much more difficult to really embrace and be comfortable working in a new context.

And that brings me to the **why**. You should have a good idea of why it is you want to recontextualize your work and what you intend to gain from it, creatively and financially. For myself, I think I was lucky in that my work naturally fell between, or maybe across,

many practices. My learning curve mostly involved learning to discuss my work as comfortably with visual artists as I was with musicians. But the fact that I made the effort to become familiar with both cultures and was able to work comfortably as an artist as well as a musician, led to not only an incredible amount of personal growth in the understanding of my own practice, but also more than doubled my opportunities for getting my work 'out there'. Unlike artists who only work in galleries or musicians who only work in venues, cross-practice artists are at home in either, meaning that many more grants and funding streams open up to them. Of course, your journey will almost assuredly differ, but remember, it's the work that counts not the category and as long as you know what you're about, what the general context is, and have an interesting perspective to share, you're almost guaranteed to do well.

And finally, how you become familiar with another sphere of practice is going to depend on each individual situation and what practices are being bridged. I did plenty of reading, watching online tutorials, attending shows, exhibitions, openings, seminars, and conferences. Other than attempting to immerse yourself within the new creative culture you want to work in, the most realistic piece of advice I can offer is **don't be afraid to ask for directions**. I could easily say that the majority of my journey from the stage to the gallery and back again was done amongst friends that I made along the way. My first gig in Aberdeen as a well known artist in the States but an anonymous one in the UK was at a local pub. It was because of that gig that I met the director of an artist led group that led to many installations and projects with visual artists. It was at that gig that I also met the curator of a local gallery who invited me to perform during one of their exhibitions. They then introduced me to an assistant curator of a well known gallery in Edinburgh which led to a number of performances during their exhibitions as well. These contacts, who soon became friends led to other opportunities and so it goes. There was very little cold calling at all, if any.

Of course after a certain point, you might find yourself in a situation where you haven't met the curator or director of a gallery or venue where you'd like to show your work. I was in just this situation a couple of years ago when I received the Atom award from the PRS to do a tour across the UK. In many instances I was attempting to find a performing venue in a city where I had no contacts and was forced to 'cold call' various venues and galleries to host my project. I simply drafted a well written email with a description of my project and who I was, what I was asking them to provide, and links to my website, CV, and examples of my work, and took it from there. For the most part it was a smooth journey and in the process I made many new friends who I've collaborated with on many exhibitions and performances since. After all, we are talking about people here, not dragons. As long as you can explain what you want to do, come across relaxed and don't have too many unrealistic expectations, you should do fine.

I hope this article has helped alleviate some of the fear of crossing into new creative contexts. No one article can cover every situation as each has its own unique set of circumstances to navigate. I think the main keys though are to be aware of what you and your work are about, be sensitive to the new culture you're attempting to work in, know why it is you want to work within that culture, and don't be afraid to be open and ask questions from the people you meet along the way. Chances are they are going to be as fascinated with your practice as you are of theirs and will want to pick your brains for some insights as well.

Best of luck!

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