

## ***The Transitional Space of Interdisciplinarity***

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In recent times there has been a disturbing sense that the arena of arts and humanities-led interdisciplinary work – grounded in critical, ethical and political debate – is being appropriated and used to deliver instrumental government policy: to answer questions rather than pose them, and to provide market-driven solutions rather than challenge ideological norms. This essay argues for the importance of acknowledging the more relational and thus emotional aspects of interdisciplinary research and practice, suggesting that it is only by paying attention to the psychic dimension of interdisciplinarity that we can understand its transitional status and transformational potential, and so better position ourselves in today's sites of contestation.

In both academic and arts-based contexts, the term interdisciplinarity is often used interchangeably with multidisciplinary, but I understand the terms to mean quite different things. Multidisciplinary research for me describes a way of working where a number of disciplines are present but maintain their own distinct identities and ways of doing things; whereas in interdisciplinarity research individuals operate between, across and at the edge of their disciplines and in so doing question the ways in which they usually work. This can occur when one individual's work moves from one discipline to another, and it can also occur when individuals from different disciplines work with one another getting closely engaged in the procedures and ideologies that structure each other's research modes and practice paradigms. Elsewhere I have described the patterning of this kind of work, in terms of critical spatial practices, processes that tend to operate horizontally: surveying a field, examining the fissures, the points where disciplines come apart, the precise nature of the places where they come together – at boundaries, in folds and overlaps, across tears and rips; rather than vertically, where the techniques of in-depth focused research might be favoured.<sup>1</sup>

In exploring questions of method or process that discussions of interdisciplinarity inevitably bring to the fore, Julia Kristeva has argued for the construction of 'a diagonal axis':

Interdisciplinarity is always a site where expressions of resistance are latent. Many academics are locked within the specificity of their field: that is a fact ... the first obstacle is often linked to individual competence, coupled with a tendency to jealously protect one's own domain. Specialists are often too protective of their own prerogatives, do not actually work with other colleagues, and therefore do not teach their students to construct a diagonal axis in their methodology.<sup>ii</sup>

In my view, engaging with this diagonal axis demands that we call into question what we normally take for granted, that we question our methodologies, the way we do things, and our terminologies, the words we give to the things we do. The construction of 'a diagonal axis' is necessarily a difficult business. Kristeva's phrase 'expressions of resistance' points to the unconscious operations at work in interdisciplinary practice.<sup>iii</sup> And cultural theorist Homi Bhabha also describes the encounter between disciplines in psychoanalytic terms as an 'ambivalent movement between pedagogical and performative address' – suggesting that we are both attracted by and fearful of the interdisciplinary.<sup>iv</sup>

It is precisely for this reason that I am a passionate advocate for interdisciplinarity; because such projects are for me critical, ethical and political but also emotional and unpredictable – interdisciplinary work *is* difficult – not only materially and intellectually, but also psychically. In demanding that we exchange what we know for what we do *not* know, and that we give up the safety of competence and specialism for the fear of inability and the associated dangers of failure, the transformational experience of interdisciplinary work produces a potentially destabilizing engagement with existing power structures, allowing the emergence of fragile forms of new and untested experience, knowledge, and understanding.

Given the recent appropriation of the term interdisciplinarity in the meta-discourses of academe and higher education, where the word is now used in place of multidisciplinary, it seems important to distinguish the particular qualities of an interdisciplinary approach. I suggest that the aim of such work is to question dominant processes that seek to control intellectual and creative production, and to instead generate new resistant forms of research and practice. In following a desire to imagine rather than apply, to invent rather than to copy, this kind of activity requires emotional as well as mental and physical energy, it therefore needs to be positioned within the context of psychic experience, particularly in connection to different psychoanalytic concepts concerning the transitional processes and subjective spaces of relationality.

The focus of the theory of object relations created and developed by the Independent British Analysts is the unconscious relationship that exists between a subject and his/her objects, both internal and external.<sup>v</sup> D. W. Winnicott introduced the idea of a transitional object, related to, but distinct from, both the external object, the mother's breast, and the internal object, the introjected breast. For Winnicott, the transitional object or the original 'not-me' possession stands for the breast or first object, but the use of symbolism implies the child's ability to make a distinction between fantasy and fact, between internal and external objects.<sup>vi</sup>

I have introduced the terms 'transitional object' and 'transitional phenomena' for designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral eroticism and true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness.<sup>vii</sup>

This ability to keep inner and outer realities separate yet inter-related results in an intermediate area of experience, the 'potential space', which Winnicott claimed is retained and later in life contributes to the intensity of cultural experiences around art and religion.<sup>viii</sup> Winnicott discussed cultural experience as located in the

‘potential space’ between ‘the individual and the environment (originally the object)’. In Winnicott’s terms, for the baby, this is the place between the ‘subjective object and the object objectively perceived’.<sup>ix</sup>

This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control. ... I have located this important area of *experience* in the potential space between the individual and the environment, that which initially both joins and separates the baby and the mother when the mother's love, displayed as human reliability, does in fact give the baby a sense of trust, or of confidence in the environmental factor.<sup>x</sup>

It is the potential space offered by interdisciplinary work that I believe is such a strong attractor; another, as yet unknown, discipline offers the chance to ‘lose control’.<sup>xi</sup> And if interdisciplinarity can be defined as the making of relationships between one discipline and another – through subject *and* object relations – then we might argue that the very work of interdisciplinarity is configured around the process of making relationships, continuously confronting the question of what it means to relate to, and therefore recognize, an ‘other’. As psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin writes, this question of ‘how is it possible to recognize an other?’ has been a key concern of feminism,<sup>xii</sup> while in her view the central task of psychoanalysis is the ‘double task of recognition: how analyst and patient make known their own subjectivity and recognize the other’s’.<sup>xiii</sup> Benjamin’s interest is in pushing beyond reversal, ‘by contemplating the difficulty of creating or discovering the space in which it is possible for either subject to recognize the difference of the other’.<sup>xiv</sup> Grounded in the object relations theory of Winnicott, Benjamin argues that psychoanalysis requires both an intrapsychic focus to examine relations between the self and the internalized other as object, and an intersubjective approach to explore the relationship between subjects and externalized others.<sup>xv</sup>

Such a theoretical perspective suggests that objects exist both internally and externally and mediate transitional spaces – moving back and forth in both directions – across and through inner and outer worlds and the places between

them. In visual and spatial culture, feminists have drawn extensively on psychoanalytic theory to think through relationships between the spatial politics of internal psychological figures and external cultural geographies.<sup>xvi</sup> The field of psychoanalysis explores these various thresholds and boundaries between private and public, inner and outer, subject and object, personal and social in terms of a complex understanding of the relationship between 'internal' and 'external' space. Cultural geographer Steve Pile has described it like this:

While inner life is distinct, there is continuous exchange between the internal and external, but this 'dialectic' is itself interacting with the transactions between 'introjection' and 'projection'.<sup>xvii</sup>

The psychic processes of recognition and identification, as well as introjection and projection, provide a rich source of conceptual tools for exploring the complex relationships made between subjects and others, and between people, objects and spaces. Benjamin argues that once we start to think in terms of relationships between subjects, or subjectivity, we have no choice but to consider these intrapsychic mechanisms of relation, most importantly identifications: 'Once subjectivity is embraced', she says, 'we have entered into a realm of knowledge based on identifications, hence knowing that is intrapsychically filtered.'<sup>xviii</sup>

Feminist theorist Diane Fuss also states that identification is 'a question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside';<sup>xix</sup> it is, she writes, 'the psychological mechanism that produces self-recognition'.<sup>xx</sup> While Fuss outlines how identification involves the interrelationship of two processes each working in different directions: introjection, the internalization of certain aspects of the other through self-representation, and projection, the externalization of unwanted parts of the self onto the other, visual theorist Kaja Silverman has explored identification in terms of cannibalistic or idiopathic identification where one attempts to absorb and interiorize the other as the self, and heteropathic identification where 'the subject identifies at a distance' and in the process of identification goes outside

his/herself.<sup>xxi</sup> This tension that operates between obscuring and so losing the other, and/or being engulfed or lost within the other, is perhaps the key experience of interdisciplinary work, and its qualities of imagination and mystery, fantasy and seduction.

Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche is probably best known for his re-examination of Sigmund Freud's controversial abandonment of the seduction theory, and his turn to the child's fantasy to explain seduction, thus at some level, according to Laplanche, avoiding thinking-through the complex interplay of inner and outer worlds between the child and what Laplanche calls 'the concrete other'.<sup>xxii</sup> Laplanche maintains that this early scene of seduction is of key importance to psychoanalysis as it works to de-centre the position of the subject in its articulation of the formation and role of the unconscious. For Laplanche, it is the embedding of the alterity of the mother in the child, which places an 'other' in the subject; this other is also an other to the mother – as it involves her unconscious. Thus, the message imparted to the subject by the other – in Laplanche's writings, the mother or concrete other – is an enigma both to the receiver, but also to the sender of the message: the 'messages are enigmatic because ... [they] are strange to themselves'.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In Laplanche's discussion of the enigmatic message he suggests that transference – or the work of psychoanalysis – occurs not first in the psychoanalytic setting to be applied in culture, but the other way around: 'maybe', he writes, 'transference is already, "in itself", outside the clinic'.<sup>xxiv</sup> For Laplanche, the analyst or recipient subject is involved in a two-way dynamic with the enigmatic message: s/he is, 'caught between two stools: the enigma which is addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public'.<sup>xxv</sup>

More recently, Laplanche has supplemented his concept of the enigmatic message with an account of seduction that emphasises the importance of inspiration, or the role of the other as muse.<sup>xxvi</sup> In this investigation Laplanche inverts the traditional model of creative self-expression outlined in Freud's 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' (1908), arguing that the 'moment of address' should be inverted from

its narcissistic aspect, where it moves from the creator's self expression to a receptive public who are expected to provide a beneficial response to the public, whose expectation provokes the creative work: 'it is the public's expectation, itself enigmatic, which is therefore the provocation of the creative work ...'.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In recognizing the importance of transference in cultural activities that take place outside the clinic – the potential and often unexplainable resonances produced by the enigmatic and seductive qualities of 'messages': their strangeness, the ways they inspire, the manners in which they excite expectation – the writings of Laplanche are key to conceptualizing processes of relation in interdisciplinarity in terms of creativity.<sup>xxviii</sup> It is interesting to consider his understandings of the seductive qualities of the enigmatic other in parallel to Winnicott's notion of transitional space with its qualities of potential-ness as the place of relation between two. The role psychic processes – intrapsychic and intersubjective – including identification, recognition, introjection, projection, transference, seduction and inspiration – play in structuring the complex emotional space of interdisciplinary work, needs to be acknowledged in order to allow us to realise the care and time required to research and practice in this way. In order to generate a culture of mutual respect in these times of appropriation, skills of trust and concern are needed to balance the ever-present more destructive passions, such as jealousy and suspicion, as well as to help work-through the often debilitating aspects of anxiety and ambivalence.

At the moment of writing, government initiatives in higher education are increasingly focusing on financial objectives: on the one hand, the practice of teaching is being pushed towards a phase of deepened alienation – with the acquisition of knowledge valued in solely monetary terms: and on the other, research funding is being directed to favour enterprise and impact – with the commodification of concepts, experiences and emotions, as well as the more obvious object-like artefacts, patents and prototypes, tipped towards their potential sale at the market. In such an atmosphere, the value of arts and humanities research and practice, with its rich history of politically-driven interdisciplinary work is in grave danger of becoming unhinged from its ethical underpinnings and history of critical theory, becoming attached instead to industrial

applications and problem-solving agendas. Against our protestations, we are seeing, almost daily, the marginalization of those areas of research and practice that do not demonstrate short-term economic benefit, and the stealthy creep of recuperation: the use of terms which derive from the arts and humanities – such as interdisciplinarity – that stand for critical, ethical and political ways of working – to support non-principled agendas and pragmatic delivery techniques.

When the focus on creativity is driven by ‘application’, it is less usual for an artist/designer/writer to operate in an interdisciplinary way, to make a ‘problematic’ artefact that questions the context of application and adopts another discipline’s perspective in order to reflect critically on the ideological assumptions which underpin its own methods. As the agenda of UK teaching and research increasingly heads to market we need to protect work that values self-questioning over more positivist models, often self-congratulatory, of short-term implementation and financial benefit. Interestingly, it might be that the very emotional register of interdisciplinary work, which I have argued here lies at the heart of interdisciplinarity, may be a site of potential strength due to its vulnerable nature. In resistance the ability to be subtle, to know how to care for fragility, to be able to make strong relationships as well as critique concepts, practices and methods, may be vital in building alternatives. The ethics of interdisciplinary – the fascination of one for the other – configured as respect for difference, certainly allows for the exploration of boundaries and transitional processes, yet as well as using these abilities to reveal the workings of power in disciplinary structures of knowledge, and exposing strategies of appropriation and recuperation, right now such skills are being put to action in the formation of new social movements. We need these qualities even more urgently today in order to nurture the emergence of these marginal and often complex forms of practice that are at once questioning of dominant ideological and economic systems and capable of constructing relations and proposing futures other than those envisaged for the short-term by neo-liberal capitalists in pursuit of immediate financial gain.



## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See Jane Rendell, Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London: IB Tauris, 2006) and Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, (London: IB Tauris, 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: an interview', Alex Coles and Alexia Defert, eds, *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-*, v.2, (London, Blackdog Publishing, 1997), pp. 3-21, pp. 5-6.

<sup>iii</sup> See for example Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 25 and Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers*, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 2-3.

<sup>iv</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 163.

<sup>v</sup> Gregorio Kohon (ed.) *The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition* (London: Free Association Books, 1986) p. 20. The British School of Psychoanalysis consists of psychoanalysts belonging to the British Psycho-Analytical Society, within this society are three groups, the Kleinian Group, the 'B' Group (followers of Anna Freud) and the Independent Group.

<sup>vi</sup> D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 34 (1953) pp. 89–97, see in particular pp. 89 and 94. See also D. W. Winnicott, 'The Use of an Object', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 50 (1969) pp. 711–716.

<sup>vii</sup> Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', p. 89.

<sup>viii</sup> Winnicott discussed cultural experience as located in the 'potential space' between 'the individual and the environment (originally the object)'. In Winnicott's terms, for the baby this is the place between the 'subjective object and the object objectively perceived'. See D. W. Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 48 (1967) pp. 368–372, p. 371. See also D. W. Winnicott: *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>ix</sup> Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', p. 371.

<sup>x</sup> Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', pp. 371-2.

<sup>xi</sup> For an intelligent and moving account of what it means to loose control in collaborative and interdisciplinary architectural practice see Doina Petrescu, 'Losing Control, Keeping Desire', in Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (eds), *Architecture and Participation* (London: Spon Press, 2005), pp. 43–64.

<sup>xii</sup> Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. 80.

<sup>xiii</sup> Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. xii.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. xii. See also Jessica Benjamin, 'An Outline of Intersubjectivity: The Development of Recognition', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, v. 7 (1990) pp. 33–46, especially pp. 34–35 and Jessica Benjamin, 'Response to Commentaries by Mitchell and by Butler', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, v. 1 (2000) pp. 291–308, p. 302.

<sup>xv</sup> Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. xiii and p. 90.

<sup>xvi</sup> See for example, Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Fuss, *Identification Papers*; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>xvii</sup> Steve Pile, *The Body and The City* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 91. See also Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 27–61.

<sup>xviii</sup> Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. 25.

<sup>xix</sup> Fuss, *Identification Papers*, p. 3.

<sup>xx</sup> Fuss, *Identification Papers*, p. 2.

<sup>xxi</sup> Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'An Interview with Jean Laplanche', © 2001 Cathy Caruth. See <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt> (accessed 3 May 2006). Laplanche notes that Freud uses the terms *der Andere* and *das Andere* to distinguish the other person from the other thing. See Jean Laplanche, 'The Kent Seminar, 1 May 1990', John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (eds) *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives* (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992) pp. 21–40, p. 25.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Caruth, 'An Interview with Jean Laplanche'.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Jean Laplanche, 'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst' [1992] translated by Luke Thurston, *Essays on Otherness*, edited by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 214–233, p. 222. See also Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, translated by David Macey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989) pp. 152–154.

<sup>xxv</sup> Laplanche, 'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst', p. 224.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Jean Laplanche, 'The Theory of Seduction and the Problem of the Other', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* v. 78 (1997) pp. 653–666, p. 665.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Jean Laplanche, 'Sublimation and/or Inspiration', translated by Luke Thurston and John Fletcher, *New Formations* v. 48 (2002) pp. 30–50, p. 49. See also Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' [1908] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906–1908): Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959) pp. 141–154.

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<sup>xxviii</sup> The work of Laplanche has been taken up in film, literary and art history. See Richard Rushton, 'The Perversion of The Silence of the Lambs and the Dilemma of The Searchers: on Psychoanalytic "Reading"', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, v. 10, n. 3 (December 2005) pp. 252-268; Allyson Stack, 'Culture, Cognition and Jean Laplanche's Enigmatic Signifier', *Theory, Culture & Society*, v. 22, n. 3 (2005) pp. 63-80 and Mignon Nixon, 'On the Couch', *October*, v. 113 (Summer 2005) pp. 39-76.