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# Practicing Theory

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*I've been through the desert on a horse with no name*

*It felt good to be out of the rain*

*In the desert you can't remember your name*

*'Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain*

—America

As a practitioner, I have always framed Media Study as an *everything space*, an oasis of possibility where the exploration of new ways for seeing and making our world—new connections, filters, and perspectives—are prototyped, tested, cultivated, and perhaps most importantly, *encouraged*. As media makers, we find ourselves engaged in a discipline of manifesting space and time, a practice firmly grounded in the Humanities—the investigation and consideration of our collective experience. Though *media* once implicated the specific material being utilized, in the ever-expanding field of *cultural production*, we find this material could be just about anything, with the discipline providing no preference or prescription.

In contrast to platforms such as Film, Dance, Music, English, and the like—Media Study remains delightfully agnostic, failing to lay claim to any one practice or genre, such that free-ranging representatives from across the Humanities and Sciences find solace within its *communitas*. Simply put, it is the *discipline of interdisciplinarity*, truly the purview of the generalist, the one who is open to tinkering across a wide spectrum of traditions and technologies, willing to look beyond the *known knowns*—to glance obliquely at *known unknowns*—in the hope of catching sight of the exquisite *unknown unknowns*. Poised at the precipice—staring into the abyss—the practitioners of Media Study look back only to confirm they are moving forward. Blatantly ignoring the admonishment of putting old wine into new wineskins, *we come to renew culture itself*.

Dick Higgins acknowledged as much in 1965 when he coined *intermedia* to describe those innovative practices that fell in between traditional genres or disciplines, works which manifest when two or more genres were “fused conceptually.” Higgins, awash in the unrest of the 60s, was looking to break with “venerable” terms such as *mixed-media*, which merely described works executed in more than one material. Further, he wished to democratize the “specialist” language being raised around the works of the *avant-garde*, believing “one wanted to know well the art of one's time . . . without the interventions of history and historical judgments.” To my mind, Higgins’ *intermedia* is *the business of Media Study*, that is the tearing down of the manufactured walls between academic disciplines, exploring the in-between spaces through purposeful play. In our practice-based research, we do not seek practical answers—we are not doing sums here—or even desire to formalize arguments—it is much too early for that. Rather, we are working to position ourselves to discover a more personal knowledge—*a way of knowing*—that is encountered *in the moment itself*.

In my play, this manifests as a process-driven practice that is open and indeterminate, an approach which aims to mediate between systems of *intention* and *intuition*. The majority of my tools are computational in nature, and it is through code that my students and I manifest reality. From a state of *tabula rasa*—the empty text editor, null areas of memory, or the open switch—we start to rough out an *intentional space*: first a few variables, feeding minor calculations, evolving into major functions—instantiating an environment of procedures and interconnections. This is our opening salvo into conceiving a world. Logical, structured, and left-brained, we deliberately place objects in opposition to one another—constructing hierarchies, pathways, and architectures which will give way to structures, procedures, and forms. We compile and run, transitioning into *intuitive space*, calling upon our capacities to evaluate *what is happening*—encountering the actualized, unintended, and unforeseen—followed by the *oh-that’s-cool-let’s-do-more-of-that* stage of the process and the *what-if* and *let’s-try-this* moments. Haphazard, instinctive, and incredibly right-brained, we are throwing things up to see what sticks—and when they do, we return to intentionally fix the intuitive through purposeful code. And so it goes, this modulation between *intention* and *intuition*—the back and forth between the practical and the instinctual, forming a liminal space where cultural innovation and transformation may emerge from the crucible that is the practice of Media Study.

But *how did we get here*, and perhaps more importantly, once we leave, *how do we get back*?

I often tell my students that there is no greater strength in the world than realizing you have no earthly idea what you are doing, reminding them that *what* they are doing is far less important than the fact that they are *doing* it. Which is to say that *process* and the *pursuit of*

*daily practice* will inevitably lead to *something*—an object, event, or idea—one just needs to keep hacking away at it. As I remind them, as well as myself, *the more you do it, the better it gets*. Such an approach requires an act of faith, a trust in one’s own intuition and experience—and for the practitioner, a willingness to approach every project as an experiment, an expedition into unexplored territory. As we traverse the landscape, we begin to map our practice, defining patterns and procedures, noting the topography of what works for us and what does not. As preferences develop, *theories of practice* begin to emerge—principles which help us along the way as we continue moving forward—though we may not know, as of yet, where we are going. Though these findings may be universal, in their initial state they are realized as singular personal revelations, a way of knowing the world, a *practicing theory*.

Have we been here before?

#### Works Cited

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