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Interdisciplinary research: an aesthetic approach

Abstract:

This article considers the place of image-making in interdisciplinary research. The author created a visual response to each of the other articles in this Special Issue, and reflecting on this process, thus investigating a multi-layering of interdisciplinarity: the texts themselves each engage across disciplines and the visual element then overlays a further interdisciplinarity. The arguments around the validity of creative practice as a focus for scholarly research are examined in light of Sullivan's (2010) assertion that 'artistic thinking' constitutes scholarly research because it invokes metacognitive practices.

Biographical note:

Ulrike Sturm is a current PhD candidate at Central Queensland University, Australia. Her MFA (University of Sydney 2012) researched contemporary artists working with visual narratives and graphic novels as a way of relating personal experiences of cultural alienation. She has completed a BVisArts (University of Sydney 1996), a Diploma of Law (LPAB, NSW 1990) and a BA (University of Sydney 1983). Sturm is also a practicing visual artist whose work focuses on artist's books, printmedia and visual narratives.

Keywords:

Visual narratives –Illustration as research – Interdisciplinary research – Linocuts – Metacognitive practices

Fig. 1. Ulrike Sturm, *Making*, linocut, 2016

Introduction

The breadth of themes of the papers presented at the inaugural conference of the Institute of Interdisciplinary Inquiry in Sydney in April 2015 was fittingly diverse, with approaches to the exploration of notions of space, time and bodies spanning across many fields of research. When the continuation of these discussions in this Special Issue of *TEXT* was raised with conference delegates, it presented an invitingly challenging opportunity to extend the concept of interdisciplinarity further by breaking with the traditional unobtrusive formatting and dense text of academic publications. For *TEXT*, there was also an opportunity to position illustration as storytelling, and provide a way in which an image could actively contribute to a written narrative. The willingness of the editors of this collection of articles to embrace the term 'interdisciplinary' more fully by including visual responses to each article has lead me on an adventure of not only creating a series of images, but also considering these images as a research project that contributes to both the discipline of creative art and the practice of writing.

My approach to developing ideas and creating sketches for each image, before then moving on to render them as a linocut for the final image, was based on a number of considerations. Firstly, I wished to avoid an approach that might be too literal, as visually highlighting one particular aspect of the text will inevitably select this as more significant than others. Yet, a visual response requires a decision; it seeks out visual keys in a text and interacts with them. To avoid images which operate too didactically, it seemed that a more effective approach would be to respond to the articles in an open-ended way so as to attempt to add an additional layer of narrative, as opposed to attempting to steer the interpretation of the meaning of the text in a particular direction. Secondly, the articles in this Special Issue are diverse both in terms of theoretical approaches as well as in terms of the subject matter under consideration, and this provided a considerable challenge in determining how to give the series of images an overall sense of visual cohesion. While it would be possible to design an image for each article that would be unique in visual style as well as content, I felt that this approach risked an outcome where the overall appearance of the issue could be that it almost seems to be wrestling with itself. The choice to create each image as a linocut, working in simple black and white, attempted to give the series of images a certain cohesiveness in style, but also allowing a response to the uniqueness of each article.

A further aspect in determining the appropriate format for a visual response is an acknowledgement of the spectrum from figurative or representational images to those that are highly abstract. The appeal of producing figurative images is that they give the reader/viewer a concrete focus with which to connect. Abstract imagery is at the opposing end of the spectrum, whereby marks, visual gestures and tonal variations create a mood and can indeed be said to be a true 'response' rather than an 'illustration' of the texts. In the end, I elected to settle on a hybrid approach that nods to both figurative and abstract techniques, in the hope that this avoids the trap of pure illustration, whilst inviting the viewer to be drawn to explore elements of the text within the image.

Finding an approach for a visual 'response'

In approaching this project, a primary focus for me was to 'respond' rather than 'illustrate'. Graeme Sullivan refers to 'artistic thinking' as invoking metacognitive practices and, as such, constituting research (2010), yet he suggests that the creative output, in a sense, pins down that which is being researched. It is true in that in the process of making a creative work, the artist ultimately has to make a decision to focus on certain aspects of a text at the expense of others, and while 'pinning down' could be seen as removing alternative interpretations, that is precisely what I hoped to avoid in my visual work for this Special Issue. My intention is to broaden the discussion, rather than limit it to a particular focus.

In my practice as a visual artist, one of the media with which I frequently work is that of the artist's book, a genre where the interplay between text and image forms a part of its aesthetic and engages the viewer/reader to reflect on layers of meaning (Glasmeier 1994: 84, Rice 1985: 59). It is my challenge with this project is to create an interplay of this nature. In seeking to steer away from an approach that might be too literal, I was initially left wondering whether such a visual response would end up as so ambiguous as to be no more than decorative. Although that in itself need not be a failing, it was not what I wanted to aim for here. As Sullivan's comment implies, a visual response must rest somewhere, and it is a fact that I have sought out visual keys in each text and interacted with these in developing this series of images.

Reading each author's article, there were images that offered themselves to my imagination, yet it was not always the most striking or central image that stuck with me after reading. Even when a text is quite abstract, it offers mental visual images. Then again, in other articles, such as Carla Lever's piece on 'Six Corporeal Curiosities' (2016), the reader is presented with a number of very clear visual images at the outset and the challenge in formulating a visual response is to know where a specific focus will be limiting and where it might offer a route for deeper reflection or engagement. A recurring consideration for me was whether the images would add something to both the article in itself and the publication as a whole.

Maarit Mäkëla asserts that making, and the products of making, are an essential aspect of visual art as research, because they respond to particular research questions and because they result in an outcome that collects and preserves information and understanding (2009: 1). The challenge for visual art as research according to Mäkëla is that these visual arts outcomes fall short in their ability to pass on their knowledge, thus not meeting an essential criteria of research. Does an artwork only become research once it is interpreted? Is this interpretation self-reflexive or does it relate back to the text?

With the linocuts in this *TEXT* Special Issue, my starting point was to write notes and make quick sketches of visual ideas as I read an article. Although the sketches were initially quite disparate, eventually a cohesion developed as I reflected and revisited sketches. This became a key turning point in the creative process.

Visual cohesion

Through their rich diversity in both theoretical approaches, as well as in terms of the subject matters under consideration, the content of the articles in this Special Issue provided food for challenging reflection in determining how to give the images an overall sense of visual cohesion. While it would be possible to design the image for each article so that they are each unique in visual style as well as content, I felt that this approach risked an outcome where the overall appearance of the body of work could be that it almost seems to be wrestling with itself. The decision to limit the artistic palate in this suite of images to pure black and white brings a unique aesthetic and also gives them a visual cohesiveness, but finding the balance between responding to the uniqueness of each article, and a fluidity in the images overall was an important point of consideration that was not simply resolved by the choice of medium.

Finally, the cohesive link between the images seemed to be a combination of representational imagery with some elements of abstract patterning. For me as the artist and visual researcher here, this approach resolved the specific design challenges that I had identified. The abstract elements seek to cut across the temptation to simply illustrate one or more key points from the articles, while the more representational elements provided a relatable connection with the written text, thus both aspects operate in tandem to create an individual response to each article whilst also clearly forming a suite of images as a whole.

Layers of meaning

The appeal of producing figurative or representational images is that they offer the reader/viewer a concrete focus with which to connect. Abstract imagery is at the opposing end of the spectrum, where marks, visual gestures and tonal variations create a mood and can indeed be said to be a true 'response' rather than an 'illustration' of the texts. In the end, I opted for an approach that nods to both figurative and abstract techniques, in the hope that this avoids the trap of pure illustration, whilst simultaneously inviting the viewer to be drawn to explore elements of the text within the image, thus hopefully adding a layer of meaning to the text. This strategy has powerfully been implemented by many artists, including Gustav Klimt in his 1905 oil on canvas painting *Three Ages of Woman* (Comini 1981: Plate 26), Friedensreich Hundertwasser's 1963 mixed media painting titled *I live too near the 'Route Nationale' and a Steamer goes through the Meadow* (Aberbach Fine Art exhibition catalogue 1973: 35), Barbara Hanrahan in her 1978 etching titled *Run Rabbit Run* (Carroll 1986: 77) and, indeed the visual mapping and patterning techniques in the work of many Australian indigenous artists (Art Gallery of New South Wales 2004).

The inclusion of patterning or abstract elements in a representational artwork fractures the literal way in which figurative images can tend to be read, and this mediates the works so that they might be said to give them a hierarchical semiotic meaning whereby the patterning is a 'second order sign' (Barthes 1984: 115). A further hierarchical layer of semiotic meaning connects the image and the text of the article, so while the viewer may focus simply on the image as a device for breaking up the visual uniformity of a

text-only Special Issue, the meaning contained within the image is neither random nor illustrative nor singular, and thus it is contended that the richness of the Special Issue as a whole is given greater depth by considering the visual elements – and, in this way, reflecting the title of this issue, 'Writing and illustrating interdisciplinary research'.

Visual art as research

In concert with the creative processes are research processes. Where visual artists engage with their creative practice as a vehicle of theoretical inquiry and a focus for scholarly research, the researcher in the role of an artist simultaneously carries out the creative process and production of artefacts as the target of that reflection (Nimkulrat 2012). In the case of the creative artefacts produced here, the additional focus of reflection has been a consideration of their relationship to written texts by a series of authors. Visual artists invariably produce work in response to 'something', which may be environmental, emotional, political and much more besides. The complexity in creating visual meaning in response to a work of research is evident when looking at this in terms of what Carole Gray and Julian Malins refer to as design methods (1993). This description of the methodology for producing artifacts includes collection of data (visual, written, oral), selection, analysis and synthesis, testing against known visual and performance norms, human reactions and responses as well as compromise with regard to context, function, ergonomics, manufacturing and material constraints. The complexity arises because the visual output is not intended to stand on its own, but rather, is intended to engage readers in reflecting further on the layers of meaning in the original texts. Here, I contemplate whether my research was reflecting on my own processes as an aspect of visual culture studies (Smith 2008), or would a deeper focus on a semiotic analysis be more appropriate? (Grosz 2008). These questions are left hanging for the moment and I invite readers to draw their own conclusions.

Some aspects of visual arts as research seems at times elusive, given that the design methods outlined above (Gray and Malins 1993) are often subliminal or intuitive, so that the scholarly discipline required to reflect on these aspects involves not only an understanding of methodology and theory, but also the socio-political. While this may play into the hands of those who challenge the validity of visual arts practice-led research, I believe that it is simultaneously very exciting because it subverts conventional research methodology by opening the door to new approaches. As Sullivan writes:

> The expanding landscape of imaginative and critical inquiry pursued by artists … is purpose driven, where the need to explore new opportunities for creating and critiquing knowledge is being taken up by the challenge of personal belief and public need. The process is being shaped in part by artists who see structures that define traditional discipline areas, not as boundaries or barriers, but as potential pathways that can link ideas and actions in new braided ways (2010: 156).

Article reflections

The betwixt and between indeed. Simon Dwyer, Rachel Franks, Monica Galassi and Kirsten Thorpe, in their introduction, lay out the considerable scope of this collection, and there were more then a few occasions when I wondered about the folly of attempting a visual response to each article. At the core of the Special Issue is the examination of interdisciplinarity from an incredibly diverse series of perspectives, and in my visual response to the editors' introduction, it seemed appropriate to draw elements of my responses to subsequent articles.

The interdisciplinarity of Donna Lee Brien's and Margaret McAllister's shared research, particularly with its relation to mental health issues, created an image in my mind of reaching out, which I visualised as connecting hands.

The strong resonance of the 'I' or first person in Irene Water's article was front and center in my mental visual impressions for the accompanying image, but it was also impossible to dismiss the impact of Water's (false) memory of the incident relating to her brother's toe.

Carla Lever's article begins with a series of six 'exhibits' – each of them powerful imagery exploring reflecting on South Africa's history. The strength of these 'exhibits' initially confused my search for a visual response to the article but in the end, I felt drawn (no pun intended) to the Kentridge 'exhibit', partly because I have long admired his work and also because his short film, 'Ubu tells the Truth' splendidly combines a collage of media and absurdism to relate harrowing aspects of South Africa's recent past. My image reframes a short sequence from the 'Ubu' animation, exploring the passage of time and ambiguity of meaning. I was concerned that it may be construed as pessimistic, which I feel would run counter to the article, and I can merely hope that the absurdist element is apparent to the audience.

In Louise Harrington's complex examination of violent conflicts and their treatment in conflict cinema, the role of (male) protagonists is key. Yet in my image for this article, I felt that a depiction of such protagonists would be too representational and thus, I preferred to create an image that clearly referenced both war and cinema, without attaching specificity.

The focus on lighting as an intermediary in performance in Simon Dwyer's article brought to mind the power of light and the geometric beauty of intersecting light beams, as well as the power of lighting as an element in storytelling.

Lisa Stafford and Kirsty Volz's critique of body-space politics in relation to architecture considers architectural spaces across the spectrum from domestic to public and commercial. I chose to depict an office block partly because of the patterning in its symmetry. The notion of exclusion is suggested by the figures in the foreground being visible as silhouettes of negative space.

Victoria Reeve's article examines subjectivity and identity in intersectional time against a background of war. Rather than engage with particular episodes from Reeve's article, my visual response to this article comes from a strong mental image of the poppy as a symbol for remembrance. It was not until after I had drawn this image that I became

aware that a poppy also adorns the cover of the paperback edition of Flanagan's book.

The image for Rachel Frank's article is more figurative than I had initially envisaged. Upon investigating the 'true crime' publications of the 1940s, the focus of this article, I became fascinated by their inappropriately salacious covers. This image is based on the style of the 'real thing', but the composition is a work of fiction.

The challenge in responding visually to A. Andreas Wansbough's article is to go beyond the highly overt imagery of Von Trier's film and yet, to still reference it in the context of Hegel's concept of spirit ('Geist') in Phenomenology.

Throughout Kristal Lowe's discussion of time and the remaking of the feminine gendered subject in the Twilight series, themes of violence are recurrent. In the first book of the series, mirrors in a dance studio are shattered in an attempt on Bella's life. The jagged edges of the abstract patterning of the broken glass references these themes. The aspect profiles of Bella and Edward (Bella looking up towards Edward) against this fractured background underscore the portrayal of the feminine gendered subject within the series.

For my illustration for my own article within this Special Issue, I simmered and stewed on ideas for far too long, almost afraid to pin them down. Then a deadline looms and I begin to vaguely panic. The creative process for me seems to beckon a reckless adrenaline rush, but still I always fear that my visual ideas are not what they could be or should be. In the end, I have to just release them and realise that I have no control over anyone else's response to them.

Conclusion

By including images, I feel the result is kind of a multi-layering of interdisciplinarity, in that the texts themselves engage across disciplines and the visual element then overlays a further interdisciplinarity. As each image reflects on the accompanying article in some way, the research aspect of image-making has been very present in arriving at the form of the image. As Sullivan states, 'visual arts research has to be grounded in practices that come from art itself, especially inquiry that is studio based' (2010: xvii). This research has resulted in multitudes of sketches, many abandoned ideas and laborious (but admittedly pleasant) hours of carving away at lino blocks, to coax the light out of the solid black of the uncut block. Latent in this process are the many years that I have spent making images to date, so that the research to some extent grows on top of my previous experiences of image making.

The place of visual arts in academia has a history of contention, and while it is today more accepted that these arts can contribute to a fuller understanding of everyday reality, Sullivan contends that this debate 'is rarely heard within academic rhetoric, cultural commentary, or public debate, and this leaves artists, critics, theorists, and teachers talking among themselves' (2010: 65). The illustrations here run parallel with the creative practice of the written narrative, in a way that allows each component of each article (the writing and the illustration) to be 'read' in isolation and in concert.

Creating a visual response to each article in this Special Issue of *TEXT* afforded me the

opportunity to engage deeply with each author's research, and it is my sincere hope that my images also present readers with an additional level of engagement with the texts as well as contributing to the broader discussion of visual arts as research.

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