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Intersenses/Intermedia: A Theoretical Perspective

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SPECIAL SECTION INTRODUCTION

Intersenses/Intermedia:
A Theoretical Perspective

The first installment of the *Leonardo* project on Synesthesia and Intersenses appeared in February 1999 (Vol. 32, No. 1) with two articles that concentrated on the history of synesthetic types of phenomena, both as a physical/perceptual state of being experienced by some people and as a metaphorical framework for a genre of artworks specializing in crossing boundaries. There is an amazing history of this phenomenon—beginning with the first recorded occurrences hundreds of years ago and continuing through the concentrated interest seen at the end of the nineteenth century—which investigates the mapping of one structure, originally composed in one medium, onto another structure in another medium. How do things that sound *look* when the structure of the composition is mapped onto a visual medium? How does a visual composition *sound* when this system is mapped to the syntax of a language in a different medium? What is this kind of activity to be called?

In 1966 Dick Higgins named the phenomenon “intermedia.” He wrote a short essay, which he sent out for free to his Something Else Press [1] mailing list; this became the first issue of a regular newsletter. I am so happy that *Leonardo* is able to republish this seminal essay here, which provides a definition of great relevance in the new century. How does one distinguish between Richard Wagner’s multimedia concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Dick Higgins’ ideas of commingled, shared structural patterns coming from completely different worlds? Higgins did not invent these doings—many artists before him had achieved “intermediality”—but he named the phenomenon and defined it in a way that created a framework for understanding and categorizing a set or group of like-minded activities. We are also publishing in this issue some of Higgins’ own works that fulfill the necessary qualifications of intermedia work. Not only was he able to define this work, but he was an artist whose life and work were steeped in intermedia.

We have reached a period in time when it is not only much easier to perform intermedia, but our tools invite us to do so, owing to the natural capabilities of computers. Not only is it easier to connect one system to another, but we also have a surgically precise collage tool. We can cut and paste multiple layers with multimedia. Our artistic procedures can achieve greater and greater complexity. How does one talk about this work?

Yvonne Spielmann uses the conceptual structure of intermedia to form a critical analysis of digital film and video in her article “Intermedia in the Electronic Arts.” Intermedia is a combinatory structure of syntactical elements that come from more than one medium but are combined into one and are thereby transformed into a new entity. Spielmann calls this synthesis an obligatory part of intermedia. Intermedia is the product of interactions between independent systems in time and space. In many ways similar to the concept of Complexity, intermedia entails an unpredictability of outcome based on a sensitive dependence upon the initial conditions, and the final form can only be seen after going through the entire process, the transformation into the new form of intermedia.

This section also includes Robert S. Root-Bernstein’s contribution, “Music, Creativity and Scientific Thinking”—which brings me back to Jacob Bronowski and especially to the 1985 special issue of *Leonardo* dedicated to his work [2]. Imagination is as important in the practice of science as it is in art. Root-Bernstein cites many examples of scientists who are also accomplished musicians. He suggests a crossing over of conceptual practice from art

to science and back, and he points to the natural use of sonification for musical scientists when solving scientific problems.

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It is a fitting conclusion to this installment of the Synesthesia and Intersenses project to publish David Moss's vivid description of his work. Moss, one of the foremost synesthetes, summons all his sensibilities and experience to respond instantly to the slightest stimulus of any of his senses or to the reaction of the audience.

JACQUES MANDELBROJT
Leonardo Honorary Editor

References

1. *Something Else Newsletter* 1, No. 1 (Something Else Press, 1966).
2. "Jacob Bronowski: A Retrospective," *Leonardo* Special Issue, 18, No. 4 (1985).

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