

## Black to White: the Fading Process of Intermediality in the Gallery Space

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**ABSTRACT:** The article explores the processes of practice in terms of intermediality, and presents a visual and metaphorical concept for collaborative process. Through the use of a case study, *Men in the Wall* by Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie, the gallery is discussed as an intermedial environment. Certain technical devices, such as «the fade» are considered and it is argued that they contribute to the experience of an «other» space, a liminal moment that is at once present and absent, which is achieved through the blend and collision of media. The article concludes by suggesting a metaphorical analogy for the process and practice of intermedial and interdisciplinary work: the mollusc.

**Keywords:** intermediality, Process, Gallery space, Being (Intermedial Exi(s)ting), Fade, Effect/Affect.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo explora los procesos de puesta en acción desde la perspectiva de la intermedialidad y propone un concepto visual y metafórico de los procesos colaborativos. Mediante el estudio de un caso práctico, *Men in the Wall*, de Liz Agiss y Billy Cowie, se analiza el área del anfiteatro como espacio de intermedialidad. Se tienen en cuenta aspectos técnicos como el fundido y su contribución en la configuración de un espacio alternativo, un momento liminal que está presente y ausente simultáneamente y que se consigue por medio de la amalgama y choque de media. Se concluye con una analogía metafórica para describir el proceso y práctica del trabajo interdisciplinario e intermedial: el molusco.

**Palabras clave:** intermedialidad, proceso, anfiteatro, ser (existencia intermedial), fundido, efecto / afecto.



Figure 1. *Men in the Wall*, Aggiss and Cowie (2003)

## 1. Introduction

Through an exploration of the ways in which certain technical devices can be used to create spaces, collisions and boundaries between media and the spaces in which they are presented, I introduce a concept for intermedial practice that can be used to explain both the process of and relationship between the practitioner and the work in its environment. Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie are two practitioners who are developing work for the first time in the gallery space, using a performance/dance/film hybrid piece to communicate their ideas. In *Men in the Wall* Aggiss and Cowie have «crossed over» from «black box» space of performance into the «white space» of the gallery, and I use the notion of crossing over as symbolic of the process of crossing into a transcendence of space, which is obtained through the technique of «the fade». In the article the fade is not only used as discussed in the context of film theory, but also to describe the conceptual movement across states of liminality, where notions of (E)merging and (dis)appearance collide. I suggest that the *transitional space* of the fade is an intermedial «Exi(s)ting» – a deconstructive neologism that I use to capture the complexities of being both within and outside of a work, and of the process being both present and absent within a product. I discuss this notion by using the conceptual metaphor of the mollusc for work and process.

The work *Men in the Wall* is discussed in the context of the space in which it was exhibited, and the concept of the mollusc is developed to represent such an architectural space – a housing of the work and a spiral image, which indicates the process of the media. I discuss these ideas in the context of the gallery space and suggest that the gallery space is the ideal environment for intermediality because I think that intermediality is not merely about the combination of the media, but about the relationships *between* the media and practices (creation, presentation and reception) and how the media communicate with each other and the participants. Intermediality, for me, is about the

processes of working with media and how the media is situated within a space; it is not, I argue, a term that advocates the abolition of specificity, but it does deconstruct the pre-existing notions of certain medial spaces.

## **2. *Men in the Wall* (2003)**

The work of Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie could be considered as interdisciplinary as they appear to be using technology to present a performance, dance and film hybrid. The trickery they apply to their work challenges the traditionally separated «live» and «mediatized» spaces associated with the live and recorded performing arts: the digital effects applied to the work problematize the spaces in-between the media, performer and viewer. The choices about the exhibition of this work, as well as «the effect and affect of the media on the viewer» (Boenisch, 2006: 103-116), position this work in the contentious spaces of the intermedial.

*Men in the wall* is a four-screen, three dimensional stereoscopic (3D projected video) installation: four projections operate alongside each other, each projecting the image of a male performer. They dance, move and perform in individual boxes. The performers' images move out of the box only with the assistance of three-dimensional effects. At moments in a dance, the arms or legs seem to be protruding out of the boxed two-dimensional cinematic space, and at this point the bodies appear to inhabit the space *in-between* theatre, performance, painting and film.

At the Wimbledon College of Art Exhibition Launch in 2006, Aggiss commented on the experience of crossing over from one medium (theatre) to another; and suggested that moving from the black box and into a white box not only asked new questions about the work, but also about the artists and how they faced challenges of being accepted into the gallery space. The artists' dilemma is one that predates this work and Berghaus discusses it in relation to Laurie Anderson's work (Berghaus, 2005: 218), yet it is interesting to consider the borders that these artists transcend – not only within their ideas – but within the political negotiations of where their work is situated and how it is accepted.

The performance artists in *Men in the Wall* are housed within frames and the framing is challenged in several ways. The positioning of this film/performance work in the gallery space already challenges the usual framing of such work, furthermore the title and choices made about the exhibition acknowledge *the wall*, which is the space on which two-dimensional painting or photography is usually positioned. The framing is challenged further by the performers' interactions with each other; for example, the man in box four kicks the wall and

(we assume) sends vibrations to which the other performers respond. The man in box two listens with a cup against the wall of his box to the man in box one. The «boxed men» are projected separately from different projectors but they are positioned next to each other against the wall. They share the gallery space, yet they are «boxed-off» in their separate performance spaces. The spaces are also challenged by the three-dimensional effects: the limbs of the men appear to move out of film space and into the gallery space even though they have not moved from their own restrictive boxes. Furthermore, the audience space is challenged by this illusion and we question the hybrid performance and the ways in which we consume the work. Are we watching performance, film or transient landscapes on a wall? This hybrid work begs the audience to question their viewing position: as the viewer crosses into the gallery threshold they already anticipate an experience; what this work does is to challenge that experience further by crossing thresholds of mediality within it.

*Men in the Wall* challenges also the traditions of binary analysis of artworks into «live» or «mediatized» work, which they achieve through the use of technology. We become aware of this challenge to discrete medial boundaries at the moment when the work *fades* to a new scene. This moment of space, of transition, is the moment when the boundary between film and performance becomes most obvious, and this is also the moment when we question our viewing position, and it is during the processes of *fading* that we become most aware that we are situated in a gallery. The images all fade-out at the same time and this locates and joins them once again in space: when the images disappear from the gallery we are thrown into a blackness that is not unlike a performance or cinematic space. At the moment of blackness the performers are sharing a space that is «other» to our viewing space. When the performers return, we are aware once again that they are simultaneously present and absent from each other, separately boxed in projections but together in the gallery space. The fade acts as a literal crossing in relation to the media content and as an experiential crossing in terms of audience spaces.

The fade is applied in cinematic space but originated on the stage.<sup>1</sup> Theatre might use a black-out between scenes in the way that film would use a fade-out. However, the result is usually more physical and disruptive in theatre, perhaps because of the corporeal presence and perhaps because black-outs tend to be used in order that something can be changed physically on stage, creating a sense of spatial or temporal change, but of course remaining simultaneously within the actual space and the viewing place of theatre. The phenomenological response to the fade in this work is more complex because of the use of three-

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1. Vardac (2005) discusses the transition of theatrical method from stage to screen.

dimensional effects. The effect applied to the work is an attempt to challenge the spatial relationships between performer and audience, and also between the medium of film and the medium of theatre.

With each new scene the scale of the performers is not changed; the camera is not used for close-ups or any other change of position and, as a result, the distance between the performers' space and the background becomes vast. The backgrounds are images of landscapes that change in each scene, varying from an urban setting to the rolling hills of the countryside. The distance between the performers and their projected environment is emphasised with each change of scene, and even more so when the performers (through the three-dimensional effect) seep into the gallery viewing space. The consequence of this is that, as the performers become further removed from their semi-inhabited background, they move closer to the audience. One is able to recognise the *mise-en-scène* of the gallery space, in which projected mediated performers are «tricking»<sup>2</sup> the viewer into thinking they are in a live space. It is at this point that the intermedial may be experienced: experienced from a phenomenological perspective.

The fade is a tool that is traditionally used in both the live and mediatized spheres, but in this work it emphasises the differences between the live and mediatized media: with each fade-out/fade-in the viewer questions further the relationship between the media and the ways in which the practices attempt to communicate by using the same device.

As well as recognising the structural exhibition choice of the gallery space, the work challenges the relationships between art and spectator in other structural ways: the images are projected and have been pre-recorded using a lens, but at no point is the lens used to alter the perspective, as is traditional in most moving-image work:

By fixing the camera the directors have abdicated the power to suggest where the audience should focus their attention, and by providing four screens and the freedom to move around the gallery they have re-instated the viewer's ability to choose where to look at any point. In this respect, the piece aligns itself more with live dance performance than with film. (Cowie in Aggiss & Cowie, 2006: 124)

In filmmaking, it is typically the production that dictates the material viewed, whereas in live performance it is typically the viewer that has choice of perspective. The confusion of these media in *Men in the Wall* blurs the boundaries between production and reception:

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2. This is meant in the way that Gunning (2005) discusses illusion in early cinema, as «exhibitionist», directly influenced from Theatre.

In *Men in the wall*, the performers are somehow attempting to break into the viewer's real space – they even appear to be aware of them.

Warren: «I saw them again»,

Holger: «Who?»

Jeddi: «He means his bloody ghosts»,

Holger: «What ghosts?»

Warren: «The ones with the green and red eyes».

(Aggiss and Cowie, 2006: 124)

This self-reflexive comment places the performers within a shared space with the viewer. The comments by the performers deconstruct the spaces between them and their boxes, through dialogue with each other, bridging the spaces between performer and audience through recognition, and interrogating the spaces between the live and the mediatized because of this. This approach resonates with the artistic perspectives adopted by Classical Hollywood Cinema and the work of the Avant-Garde film-makers and it does this by working with the gap. If the Classical Hollywood approach was to promote a suspension of disbelief, whilst the Avant-Garde adopted what are generally associated with Brechtian approaches, then *Men in the Wall* exploits the gap in-between the two. Their performance seems to acknowledge the two approaches, but uses the effect of the gap differently by simultaneously creating an illusion and drawing attention to the fact that it is not real at the same time. This works like a fade between the two approaches: the viewer is partly submerged in the world of the work and the work partly invades the space of the spectator.<sup>3</sup>

The performers are only able to inhabit the viewing space minimally because we are aware of their boxed confinement; they are a part of a projection from which they seem to be detached. At this point, we too become aware of our own boxed confinement within the gallery space – the white box in which we have joined the performance. The space itself is in the process of fading between the traditional white gallery space and the blackness of the cinematic or theatrical zones.

A summary in regards to the boundaries then: the boundaries of the mediatized and the «live» performance are blurred for several reasons. *Men in the Wall* appears to use an «Exhibitionist» (Gunning, 2005: 39) style to engage with audiences. The performers seemingly acknowledge the audience, and the spaces in which the performers operate are neither those of traditional filmic space or theatre. The spheres of the mediatized, but perceived to be live, body are complicated again by a further mediation achieved through application of 3-d

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3. Tom Gunning (2005) discusses the influence of early cinema on the Hollywood system, questioning notions of primitive representation and emphasising the role that technology plays in the development and the reading of the work.

digital technology. It would appear that this work moves through spheres: limbs seem physically to move closer to the viewer, challenging the concept of space: «When a live dancer stretches her hand toward you, you don't really think "that hand is getting closer to me" – when a 3-d film performer does, you do» (Cowie in Aggiss & Cowie, 2006: 123).

Meike Wagner (2006: 131) states that «The phenomenological perspective describes the spectator as a *seeing and being seen body*», and although in this case the performers are not actually seeing the spectator, it would appear that the technology and the processes of multiple layers of mediation contribute to an effect of *liveness* (Auslander, 1999) and as a result present the viewer within an experience that is not quite the same as watching a purely mediatized work. The invasion of the viewing space by the bodies of the projected performers is disruptive in as much as it makes one question the space in which the limbs that appear to protrude exist. The dissolve of the bodies from one space to another contaminates without actually having left the mediatized space. The bodies are at once present and absent in a space that the viewer may feel detached from and consumed within. In this, we are reminded of a Derridean thought that is useful to explain something that seems to exist through the oozing of technological boundaries and space: «[t]he interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until later what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible» (Derrida, 1973: 129).

The boundaries between performance, film and spectator are challenged by the effects and the choices about exhibition - by the «staging», or the *mise-en-scène* of the environment in which the work is placed; furthermore, Aggiss and Cowie (2006: 1-2) refer to themselves as «maverick hybrids... teaching students that fall between the floorboards». This comment acknowledges the spaces between the disciplines, and perhaps the space is a «lack» of space: A lack in a sense because it is undefined – neither occupying a consistent physical space or a philosophical one; yet occupying an «in-between» space. The space that is acknowledged here by the practitioners is one that we can associate with the spaces of intermediality: intermediality is *in* and *amongst* the space with the viewer, the material, the idea and the media representation. It is the pre-fix, *inter*, that suggests the notion of «in-between» space.

Theorists such as Spielmann (2001: 55-61) refer to intermediality as a space for collision and exchange and Fornas (2002: 94) compares the space in terms of boundaries and crossings. I refer to intermediality as a process between artists, materials, ideas, exhibition and audience. The intermedial researcher is one that moves between disciplines: there is a theory of antidisciplinarity that can be attached to intermediality because to be too rooted in one's own discipline can destroy the processes of collaboration and intermedial practice. As we have seen, it has been suggested by theorists that intermediality is a crossing, a

boundary, a gap, another space. In practical terms intermediality is not fixed within a discipline; instead it is a varied approach, acknowledging the spaces and the boundaries of the work. It is an approach that transcends and moves beyond existing notions and boundaries, often within several disciplines, to challenge the language and the exhibition space of work in an attempt to devise pragmatic tools and develop the language in which we communicate.

The main element behind intermedial practice is the notion of process and how the work has grown, which reminds us of the Deleuzian notion of «living» within the film;<sup>4</sup> within intermedial practice there is a sense of «being» through process. So, how far can we go to interrogate the idea that intermediality is actually *being*, whereas interdisciplinarity and multimodality appear to *be*?

Intermedial work has within its fundamental «being» the notions of collision and remediation, blending and blurring, overlapping and crossing that ultimately become a being of work, the work, the work as a whole. On the other hand, multi- and interdisciplinarity are about fixed borders, separations, controlled disciplines, areas working within already understood and existing frameworks. If these are put together to form one work, they merely *appear* to be one work, and separations remain because the work has not been considered intermedially through idea and process.

Although we can start as practitioners from a particular disciplined perspective, when it comes to collaboration, a certain breaking down of this perspective and discipline is required, and a cross-disciplinary attitude to jargon and terminology that enables a new set of pragmatic tools to provide new creative and discursive languages. If we approach collaboration from a platform that is too rooted, we sometimes need to dig up the roots in order to move in new directions, rather like a plant that has outgrown its pot.

This takes us to how the work is formed and in-formed: the product can not exist intermedially if the process has not been an intermedial one. Intermedial work exists both as and within a framework of process and exhibition, and through form and in formation it becomes one work, existing as one life. It lives within its architectural space as a mollusc lives within its house space. This does not abolish boundaries between media but it does suggest that, for working practices, the project/object should be conceived, worked through and processed in synthesis, and that this will require a creative and discursive understanding between collaborators. The space of medial confusion in which intermediality can be positioned gives collaborators the opportunity to develop ways of working by creating new languages and methodological processes.

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4. Deleuze (2004: 40) discusses «living» in the film in relation to *Man with a Movie Camera* in which he describes how montage «enters into the filming, in the intervals occupied by the camera-eye (the cameraman who follows, runs, enters, exits: in short, life in the film)».

Vivian Sobchack (2004: 184) uses the terms «home», «house» and «prison-house» to explain the relationships one has with one's body. She explains that the way we consider the body depends upon whether we live «as or in ourselves». If one lives *as* oneself then one's physical presence is oneself; if one lives *in* oneself, then this insinuates that one's physical presence is not actually oneself, but merely an impression, or an appearance of oneself. The body is being used as a resource for the existing self rather than being the existing self.

I would like to suggest that this phenomenological approach can also go some way to describe the intermedial, in particular the process and how the work is constructed. The metaphorical image of the mollusc or snail's shell was one that inspired a working methodology – the body of the work must «exist». Is it an intermedial practice or does it claim to be? Are we living as a snail or are we living in the shell?

The trace of the mollusc metaphorically speaks of the practitioner and the process. The evidence that remains of the process speaks of a journey that is travelled through practical and theoretical experiences. The snail mollusc can never be without its trace; it is always a part of it and always connected to it. The journey of the snail can be traced in the same way that the process of the art always remains, as a palimpsest on canvas, through art history books and as a metaphorical trace in cultural references, discourses and thought. The moving image within the gallery space operates as a visual trace, the visual movement that propels within the shell, including the gallery on a metaphorical journey as it becomes part of the work. The work exists within the context of both the architectural space and the viewing space. Derrida uses the word «trace» to explain the relationship between absence and presence. The suggestion that what is neither completely absent nor present remains as a trace (Collins and Mayblin, 2000: 70) is a useful metaphor for understanding the process between practitioners and their work, allowing a trace of the process to exist in the product, and a trace of the product in formation in the process:

The form of an intermedia artwork is thus defined then not only by collision but also by the exchange and transformation of elements that come from different media, such as painting, photography, film, video and other electronic media. Intermedia therefore is a formal category of exchange. It signifies an aesthetic encompassment of both form and content. (Spielmann, 2001: 59)

Spielmann suggests that the media forms themselves are revealed within the contextual meaning of intermedia. The intermedial space is revealed within the practical use of the media forms and the housing space of the work. Metaphorically, the practitioner reveals a trace similar to the technological trace that can be seen as processes of remediation, as outlined by Bolter and Grusin (2001). The trace

represents a layer like a palimpsest, not totally removed, yet not always fully visible as it becomes replaced by newer methodologies and new techniques.

This notion of contamination<sup>5</sup> raises questions about the purity of art, though in structural terms, in any notion of contamination there is an assumption of purity; this contradicts Bolter and Grusin and other theorists who suggest that media is remediated, a process which rejects the idea of the pure. Derrida uses the word «contamination» as part of the process of deconstruction; his theory acknowledges that «certain characteristics of philosophy and literature might remain, but they won't be allowed an assured, overarching mastery of what is written and how it is read» (Collins and Mayblin, 2000: 100). It is possible to apply Derrida's ideas about writing and philosophy to the intermedial space: through the deconstruction of traditional artistic boundaries there is a contamination of the traditional spaces and a challenge to the ways in which work is made and received and discussed in terms of language.

My final thoughts turn to the temporality of intermediality: the intermedial point when the media is in transition, a state in which it is not quite something else, it is not complete or unfinished: it is a transition; it is a process:

[...] the intermedial links to the «not-yet» not only as a hybrid form that cannot yet be determined, but also as a temporal ex-tension that is always only provisionally realized in the happening of an instant. (Wurth, 2006: 2)

Wurth's use of the word «ex-tension» is particularly useful because of the connections with time. The fade or dissolve is often used in cinematic language to insinuate a passing of time. The fade can also be read as the tension point between one space and another, the area that controls when one space is exited and when another is entered. The fade at this point can be manipulated to fall in favour of the previous space or the next – it is at once present and absent.

The fade however can be read as the fulcrum that balances the space that controls the transitional. It is not an empty space, as in a gap, because it is a point that works as a present ex-tension of the previous and the next spaces. The fade is an ex-tension: it is a trace moment that can extend in both the *spaces that were* and the *space that is about to happen*.

The space therefore is such that one is exiting and exi(s)ting: one moment an experience is transgressing towards another instance that currently is not quite in existence, and only exists through the trace of the technology. This is rather like the idea of pre-mediation. At the point of the fade the in-formation is captured in a fragile exi(s)ting that could return to its previous form or reveal its

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5. For a discussion of confusion and contamination see Wurth (2006) and Higgins (1981 [1966]).

next presence to the viewer, who in turn is sat in-between but always within the last and next image. Presently absent from the previous and the next, and in eager anticipation of the present. Between: Exited: Exi(s)ted. The fade is the Intermedial Exi(s)ting.

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