

# Interdisciplinary course in Dance and Media at the Media Department of the University of Lapland

## Abstract:

The article documents briefly an international, interdisciplinary workshop the Media department of the University of Lapland hosted in the spring semester 2007. There are many questions and problems that arise from international collaboration and inter-artistic or even inter-disciplinary ways of working. However, I consider these problems not as obstacles but as fruitful encounters. Students from different backgrounds look at problems in a different way – there are no correct solutions for complex creative problems. Different kind of thinking exists in different fields of art, different schools and different departments. Finding solutions for difficult situations prepare students to work under pressure later on. In the age of the small multimedia devices and experience design media students should collaborate with people from other creative fields, not always with people with technological know-how.

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## Keywords:

New Media education, Physical interfaces, Spatial computing, Dance technology, Inter-artistic collaboration, International exchange

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After five years of teaching at the University of Lapland, the academic world has left me perplexed. On the other hand, teachers do still enjoy freedom to determine their subjects, course contents and methods of teaching. On the other hand, one faces a lot of restrictions, bureaucracy and administrative tasks that tend to limit the creative possibilities and available time – not to mention resources such as equipment, classroom and studio space and money. Also there is an interesting dilemma that I feel at least teachers of art & design institutions phase: should they be experts in the creative field or (also) in the field of teaching and pedagogy? Can they be experts in both? Within these two dualisms I have experienced that in order to hold a keen interest in my subject, digital and interactive media, also creative solutions for education are needed. One solution is to combine Media Arts to other disciplines in art, design and other fields as well.

In this article I concentrate in one international, interdisciplinary Dance and Media workshop the Media department of the University of Lapland hosted in the spring semester 2007. The workshop was planned and organized by the writer along with support from the faculty of Arts and Design of the university, the teachers who took part in teaching the

course and the people involved with the network. Funding from Nordplus/Creative Technology and Dance Network (C.T.D.N) in the end made the course possible. Although the course is partially off topic from the current study guide, it somehow does still fit in to it – by this I mean that the workshop was created from its topic onwards and then made to fit to our normal curriculum, not the other way around. Organizing an international workshop that hasn't been scheduled in the normal semester plan of course means a lot of extra work: not only did we need to find suitable classrooms, gallery spaces and equipment, organize the foreign teachers' and students' travel and accommodation but also find and even program inventive soft- and hardware for use in many of the interactive installations the student groups created. I present first briefly the course and then continue on to think about various issues raised by it: pedagogical, creative, collaborative and international.

## Performing Space, Time and Media workshop 18.6 – 29.6.2007

This workshop hosted by the Department of Media combined dance and other performing arts with media arts. Students of the member institutions in the (Nordic) C.T.D.N have either a dance or a media background. We hosted 17 students from six schools, from all of the Nordic countries: Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. 5 teachers took part, although two of them stayed only for one week each.

There is quite a lot of discussion of the possible areas of convergence between technology and dance, one such example is the 2-year old journal *Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*<sup>1</sup>. In educational field these two disciplines meet very rarely, and our collaboration with various institutions is an attempt to fill that gap. The C.T.D.N has been active for quite many years now, and it focuses on bringing dance and media students in the Nordic institutions closer to each other. Our previous longer program DAMA (<http://www.thedama.org/>) involved 3 months of exchange in three different countries (one month per country) for the same group of students, who developed a dance performance in which media was used. With this workshop we tried to do something different: earlier series of exchanges and workshops divided students in to two different groups: media and dance, and the communication between those two was many times difficult. This time we wanted to blur the bounda-



Fig. 1. Dance exercises brought dance to the building of the Faculty of Arts. Some media students and teachers took part in the morning exercises as well.

<sup>1</sup> Collins, 2005, p.4



Fig. 2. First exercise: choose a sentence. Use only scissors, paper, one square meter of space, sounds created with the body and create a performance based on the selected sentence in only one hour.

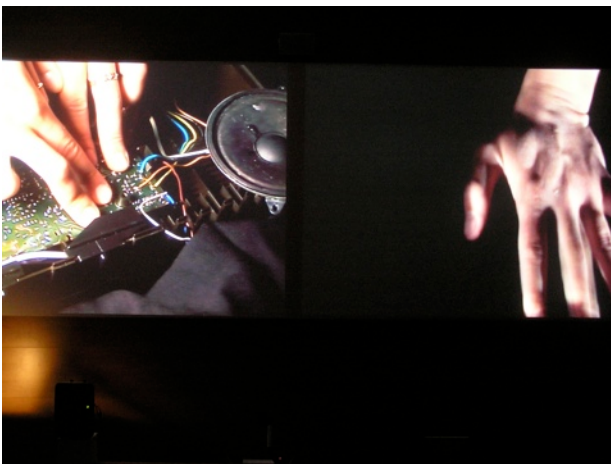
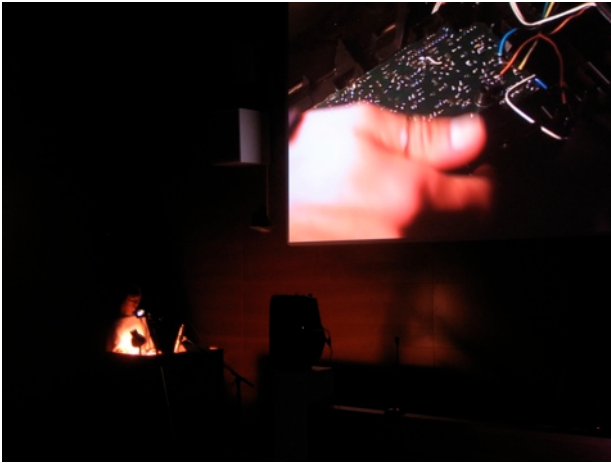
ries. Lüttringhaus and Burg note: technology can be used in all of the stages of a dance production<sup>2</sup>. But what if you aim for a product instead of a production?

This workshop gave students different possibilities for the end result: final piece could be a software or an interactive experience for the viewer, an installation, a performance or a combination of these. The production time was short: on the first week people need to get to know each other and find out ways to work in groups, develop a sense what is possible within each field and find out an idea they want to realize during the second week. The final presentations are shown in the end of the second week. Four groups were formed, 4-5 persons with various skills and backgrounds in each group.

Since dance and media are very different disciplines, we planned a series of fast exercises for the first week that introduced different working methods and possibilities of dance and media technologies to the students who had little or no experience of the other creative discipline (fig 1). In media studies it is not common to have exercises in which you expect a result in only one hour! Collaboration worked very nicely however and we got to see very wonderful presentations and performances that were realized with limited and restricted technology, time and methods. (fig. 2) For the final work to be completed during the second week, students were introduced to the common theme: *change*, and they had to de-

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<sup>2</sup>Lüttringhaus & Burg, 2006, p. 3



*Fig. 3a and 3b. One of the final performances had two persons on the stage: on the left hand side, a broken radio was played with fingers, producing interesting electronic sounds. On the right hand side, a video camera tracked movements of the performer's hand, which created a low humming sound. Both actions were projected on giant screens in the auditorium, which also is a typical non-art space.*

working methods. This might show up as frustration, anger, tiredness, or poor concentration. The students learn differently in different institutions, with different teachers, who teach differently. Media art is not the same media art in different school, neither is dance taught or thought the same way in different institutions. Lastly, even if you are willing to, sharing expertise difficult: e.g. how can a dance student / teacher know about media or vice versa? One must overcome stereotypes of the other discipline and on the other hand start with the fundamentals when talking about one's own discipline to the other.

I consider all of these problems not as obstacles but as fruitful encounters. Being able to work with others with a tight schedule and huge goals forces one to find creative solutions, communicating about the problems opens up bridges for new possibilities. Students from different backgrounds look at problems in a different way – there are no correct solutions for complex creative problems. Different kind of thinking exists in different fields of art, different schools and departments. One of the teachers' encouragements in the beginning of

decide what they want to create inside their respective groups.

In the end of the second week, the workshop culminated in a public presentation: two performances combining performance art and media, one interactive installation in which the users were activated and pre-recorded movement of the students was projected on the wall and one interactive experience where the viewers or visitors had to collaborate together – build a physical puzzle which triggered sounds and video – in order to make the installation function. All of the final works were group collaborations in the best possible way: the end results could not have been created by single persons working alone. (fig. 3-6) The students produced results beyond their scope as individuals – with a little bit of help from the teachers, but main design solutions were made by the students themselves.

## **Good problems, bad problems**

Besides organizational problems, there are many other questions or problems that arise from international collaboration and inter-artistic or even inter-disciplinary ways of working. It takes time for students, teachers and the whole network to learn how to function together. Every person involved is an individual and sometimes happenings in personal life have big implications of one's

the course for the students was: try to aim for something you don't know yet, it is better to fail and learn a lot than try to find an easy way out from dead ends and deadlocks, or to make too many compromises. Learning process occurs through trying out and making mistakes, and finally finding solutions for the problems. Managing difficult situations guide students to work under pressure later on: in international collaborations, near a deadline, with subject matters that are unfamiliar etc.

## Conclusions



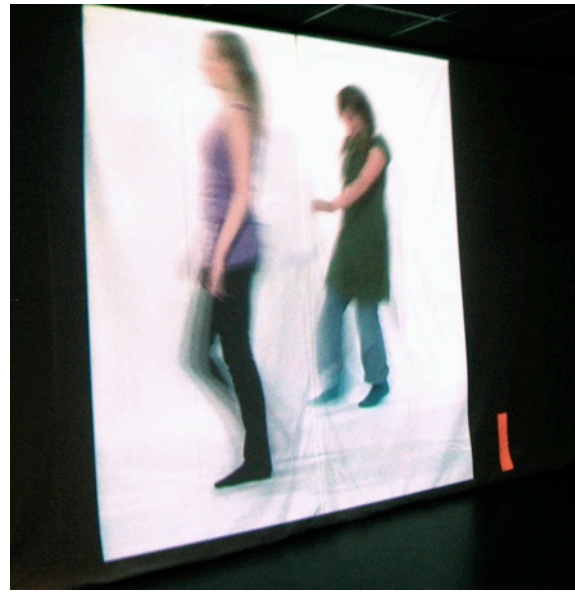
*Fig. 4. One of the performances changed the public space of the Faculty of Art into a performance space. A tempo was given, a dance student took it forward to a media student, who took it to another dancer, etc. until the final tempo was compared to the original one. The cycle was repeated a few times, each time with a different tempo.*

In the field of digital media the computer screen as a creation and publishing platform is ubiquitous and dominating. This is also visible more and more in the fields of graphic design, industrial design, even performance arts such as music, theatre and even dance. I call this development *the disappearing body*. On the other hand current computer or at least media devices such as the Nokia N95 with its slogan "*It's what computers have become*" are getting smaller, fitting in our pockets, allowing at least in theory us to use our body more freely again after the gloomy ages of sitting in front of your computer all day in an office. This phenomenon, although being currently also criticized, is quite commonly referred to as *the disappearing computer*.<sup>3</sup> These two developments are visible in research and education in the interface design and interaction design fields, currently very interested in more tangible, physical interfaces which utilize our normal movements and expressions. Media students and artists can learn a lot from people whose expertise is to control their bodies in space and time. On the other hand, in the field of dance art, there is a huge amount of interest in the possibilities interactive technology can bring to the performance, training and education. But while the combination of dance students and engineers can produce interesting results, there is still the field of interaction design missing, which focuses on communication, collaboration and experience creation. So a natural link can be seen between digital media students and dance students.

It is very important to focus on the creative ideas of the students, not to the tools, software or hardware they use or how these are used. Very often artists working in the field of digital media art have searched for partnership in the technological field, e.g. soft- and hardware engineering. In our workshop we had no students who were experts in programming or computer related hardware, and we used standard, off-the-shelf free or relatively inexpensive tools. Results were very encouraging. The tools and skills are necessary, but learning

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<sup>3</sup> Bell & Dourish, 2007 p.139



*Fig. 5a and 5b. One of the groups created an interactive installation which was controlled with a computer keyboard. By typing fast, “energy” was given to the figures on the screen: they gained colour and the video moved forward. As the energy level was decreasing (see the progress bar on the right), the video was de-saturated and finally when all of the energy was gone, the image was black and white, looping like a broken record and a machine-like sound-loop was heard. In the video, the media and dance students both walked around, using everyday-life body movements in more or less performative way.*

and using them should follow the inventiveness and the creative ideas. If something seems impossible to create, one must think about ways of narrowing the task down or realizing the same thing differently without destroying or modifying too much the original idea. On the other hand, the creative and collaborative processes usually take the original idea further, enhance it, reveal new sides about the topic, task or thing one is working on. The creative process is a good guide – to a certain extent. A creative person has to make choices, leave something out, select something else instead. And, often less is more.

My role as a teacher has slowly changed from an expert in my own field to a facilitator, tutor, helper and giver of critique. I am happy that other teachers in our workshops have shared this view. With our expertise of the fields we can provide help to define boundaries (time, money, technology, programming, performance quality, media etc...) but most of the difficult design-decisions have to be made by the students themselves. All of the choices can be seen as correct ones, but with feedback it is possible to discuss the value of the creative selections.

Workshops take only a small part of the academic year, but their importance is great for the students and the teachers. I have found out ways to incorporate what I have learned from teaching an international group of students from various backgrounds to more or less normal classes with mostly Finnish students. Contacts to different cultures are invaluable, and to be able to see how different people teach, learn, think and make art and design related choices is really inspiring and energizing.



Fig. 6a - 6h. I refer to the piece "Created?" as an interactive experience to the viewer. The participants were hand-selected from the audience of the previous installation and taken with an elevator to a room upstairs, where they encountered a white projection and black & white pieces of a puzzle - one for each person. By collaborating the participants finished the puzzle, and a layered Madonna-soundscape was built. The image contained a line drawing of an iconic Madonna-figure. Upon completion, drawn colourful portrait of the pop-star Madonna was projected on top of the religious icon-Madonna. The emotions ranged during the experience from sacred and silent to active, joyful and full-filled.

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