

The Bridge People- Part 2: The tools, The goods **By Krista DeNio**

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This is Part 2 of a three-part series in which Krista DeNio examines interdisciplinary performance making through discussions with artists who have participated in the E|MERGE Interdisciplinary Artist Residency at Earthdance in Plainfield, MA. This 2nd article takes a look at some of the tools, common practices, and approaches these artists bring to making interdisciplinary work.

E|MERGE is entering it's 3rd year. The residency encourages cross-disciplinary collaboration, forging new creative relationships, skill sharing, and innovation in approaches and methodologies. The 12-day residency includes a workshop exchange between the artists (also open to the public) and intensive project work. These projects range from groups of artists collaborating on a specific project (under project directors) to groups creating something from scratch during the residency, to other formations of interdisciplinary collaboration: lab groups, panel discussions, impromptu showings, and other spontaneous creative engagements that emerge throughout the residency. The residency culminates in a 2-day performance marathon in which site-specific, installation-based and proscenium style performances occur. The residency is designed, curated and produced by Krista DeNio, Daniel Davis, Karen Bernard, and Earthdance (www.earthdance.net).

Meet the Artists:

Emmy Bean (Chicago, IL and Montague, MA): theater artist, musician and puppeteer
<http://emlynbean.blogspot.com>

Krista DeNio (Northampton, MA): choreographer, performer, director, writer, educator, arts administrator; www.kristadenio.com

Katarina Eriksson (Sweden/San Francisco) has a long-time passion for improvisation and a newfound interest in directing inter-disciplinarily. She teaches Contact Improvisation and Dance Improvisation.
<http://momentsnoticeimprov.blogspot.com>

Rythea Lee (Florence, MA): dance-theater creator/performer, director and musician;
www.zanyangels.com

Sophia Remolde (New York, NY): a theater, film, dance, and puppetry artist, who sometimes dresses as a lobster, and always loves to collaborate.
www.sophiaremolde.com

ON THE [MORE OR LESS] OVERT TOOLS: Tricks, Concepts, Methods

Wait...Is this cheating? Aren't we all supposed to come up with our own innovative, original, techniques and tools for creating cutting edge, interdisciplinary work? NO! As it turns out, peeking at our collaborator's notebook is a pretty smart technique unto itself, to share & further build on exercises, tools, approaches that are new/ancient, profound/direct, simple/complex. Whatever gets us into the studio or work space, and keeps our bodies moving |minds grooving | work evolving. What's crucial to creative process can sometimes be so simple., In an instant, a concept that we've studied over years in a hundred different forms and exercises returns to us, once again profound.

Some of my own favorite methods:

Eye Contact: In a recent project, *Contact*, I was collaborating with a visual artist and his paintings as an environment and working with varied populations: veterans, civilians, actors, musicians, dancers, non-performers, and a roaming audience who were asked to participate actively in the space. Performers and audience alike found that one of the most potent devices (in both rehearsal and performance) was direct eye contact. All media (storylines, text, choreography, paintings, music), collaborations, and intentions aside, it seemed we could not find a more direct and immediate way to connect the humans in the room than through the eyes.

Rigorous group practice for ensemble building (physical, mental): Certain recognizable, repetitive, physical, and vocal group vocabulary seems to be one of the strongest tools I find for getting the room in check, collaborators connected, and the space and ensemble focused for work. Whatever the combination of collaborators, forms, and type of work, individual and group physical engagement and connection seem essential. Whether Yoga and Suzuki, floor movement and Grotowski-based physical acting exercises, Roy Hart vocal work and Action Theater, meditation, walking—the important things to tend to are face and body opening, flexibility, vocal awakening, spatial awareness (internal/body; external/room and other bodies), precision (unison, mirroring, listening, ability to repeat), and trust (in the forms, leadership, collaborators).

Here are some nuggets from others:

Emmy Bean

Music as a bridging element: In doing some solo work, I have found the usefulness of bringing live music into a space between movement, action, and storytelling in order to look for another way into the material I'm working with. This is not news in the world of performance at large, but it is news to me. [The idea] that I can try to include music and/or songs with minimal effort—and the minimal effort is key—that enrich a performance dynamically and provide a contrasting use of voice, or a way to break vocal silence without actually speaking.

I have recently been drawn to **chance operations** and task-based work. Especially in performance, it changes everything to create a structure that exists outside of my brain on which I can hang the things that I produce.

A daily report. For 15 minutes each day, I fill out a form I've created. This form takes up a single 8 ½ x 11 page, and includes a checklist of physical/mental statistics: date, time, weather, how my breathing is, flexibility, eyesight, temperature. And in five separate sections below that, I make: a list of words, a list of sentences, a play, a song, and a drawing, spontaneous creative generation, minimal thinking.

Rythea Lee:

Writing from a prompt like "I know I am alive when..." or "I'm the boss because..." and then circling sentences that really pop, really hit the spot. Using those sentences as jumping off points for monologues either written and memorized or improvised.

Something Rose and I invented called **State Changing:** getting in pairs and finding a state of being together both in movement and sound and/or words and staying together as the state develops until it becomes a new state. [We do] the same with this next state and on like that. Developing whole worlds together by staying in, joining in and seeing what happens naturally. Letting the states grow organically. Often the "state" is a character or role or mood that gets expressed through the body and eventually in sound or words. It is a great way to learn how to collaborate in the moment and also learn presence and commitment to the moment.

ON THE [MORE OR LESS] SUBTLE TOOLS: vision, humanity, vulnerability, trust, failure, awareness, sensation, improvisation, collaboration

For me, one of the most powerful tools is vision. The tools to access depend on the circumstance, the players, a project's intention. So whether it's an exercise, a piece of music, a phrase spoken by the central character, or the overall project concept articulated in multiple discussions, dialogues, or writings—this vision acts as a centralizing force and creates investment for all participants. What's crucial is that this vision acts as an undercurrent/ heart of the work (as a Mission Statement does for an organization), so that the work itself is fueled from this place of clarity, passion, directed-ness, or whatever the work itself calls for. In the *Contact* project for instance, I would say two of the most important tools or avenues keeping us connected to our common vision (and connection there for us all, from our many perspectives) were:

- marching together as a physical, disciplinary, unifying practice, and
- drinking beers and spending time together after rehearsal

Creating a live space, in which everyone—the audience just as much as the performers—is required to take responsibility for their choices, seems to be a great tool in and of

itself. In *Contact*, the audience was first guided through the space in a line, with their hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. This could have the effect of being led like a school child, or immediate connection to one's neighbor, and the group. Ultimately, it seemed to become an immediately unifying element within this specific context. The audience was taken through the space in a specific pattern, so that they had covered all of the territory and had the opportunity to see every painting, as well as to view the performers from many angles. Then they were deposited in a specific area, which was oriented as the downstage for the next moment. From there, the space shifted and changed, and 'scenes' occurred throughout the space, with the audience being both asked and told to make their own choices about where they located themselves (which was kind of funny, because inherently we can all make those choices anytime, and shouldn't need to be given permission by those presenting a performance, especially when there was no traditional proscenium set-up). But it's amazing to see, again and again, how trained we are to wait to be told where to go or what to do, and it's amazing to see what occurs—how much more trust, investment, and actual engagement can happen—when the audience is clearly (verbally and spatially) given more autonomy, and more than that, asked to take responsibility for their own experience.

Rythea Lee:

Humanity: [The] greatest tool that I use for all my work is being in touch with my feelings, being able to name them, embody them and express them through movement, words, sound, song, and the relationship to audience. Emotional intelligence is a huge skill that takes personal and artistic devotion to track. It is a life skill that imbues everything with the self, with who one is. For me, art has little impact without true feeling.

Trust: I recently directed a project called The Survivor Theatre Project- 6 women making a multi-disciplinary theatre movement piece about surviving sexual violence. We made a 40 minute performance, wrote a collaborative script, in 2 months time, meeting 2 times a week for 1 and 1/2 to 2 hours at a time (with about 3 long rehearsals towards the end). At the end of the project, each person invited 4 guests and we showed the piece with a facilitated discussion afterwards. My favorite tool was using Authentic Movement at the beginning of each rehearsal followed by a timed writing with a prompt. Most of the women did not know each other or have any experience with AM. Several participants expressed AM as pushing a real edge in themselves and yet freeing something up at the same time. A timed writing with a prompt started with the sentence such as "I'm the boss because...." or "I know I have not healed because..." or "I know I have healed because..." or " Fuck you because....." These simple yet very sophisticated tools created a ground for connection, expression, safety, and the fostering of creative states. With AM, there is the opportunity to first tune into ones own body, breathe, emotions, spatial awareness, senses, and impulses. Then the room seems to work as one, either consciously or unconsciously, building a collaborative mind. From that place, the writing fosters the individual voice,

the making of meaning, the focus on why we are here. I found the combination of these two tools generated a trust in the group that built into powerful words and movement.

Emmy Bean:

I've enjoyed working with **failure**, doing things that I can't hope to do "successfully," as I have normally defined success, and doing things that may seem impossible or fruitless. In a recent sound-based project, faced with a deadline, I hit a wall, made a decision and threw away almost all my ideas and working files in progress. In the next hour, I sat down at the piano and tried to play this dinky little folksong that had been rattling around in my head. I couldn't do it very well. I opened the *American Handy Book for Girls* (c. 1887) and read some voice-training exercises out loud. And then I did those two things at the same time, skipping words, skipping notes, making mistakes, and banging on the piano. I made a score for this piece, recorded it, and felt more successful about it than I had about anything in a while.

Awareness of the audience: After several weeks of studying clown and physical theater, I got really friendly with the idea of noticing the room, noticing the audience, and practicing a kind of radical inclusion—letting people in to every moment I'm onstage. Every action becomes richer, funnier, more poignant, more engaging. I'm looking at the audience constantly, finding an opening to use a new approach, a new idea, or get closer to them.

Katarina Eriksson:

My main two guides in any creative work are (Bodily) **sensation and Improvisation**. If I have a topic or theme that I am interested in exploring, I try to always let my and my collaborator's in-the-moment bodily experiences show the way. Sometimes that leads me away from the original idea and towards a new one. I was recently involved in a site-specific performance in a bombed out old building in Beirut, Lebanon. Over and over, the actual tactile feeling of the house, the light, the solidity/fragility of the structures became the known territory that kept us interested and inspired, while the ambitions and fears about saying things about the historical/social/political issues that everyone in the audience had much more understanding and information about than us (four Norwegians and one Swede) faded out more and more. The audience reactions affirmed for us that we had taken the right course.

Sophia Remolde:

Collaboration is hands down my favorite tool when it comes to creating interdisciplinary work. I understand that collaboration is not an actual tool that you can hold or a method that you can even necessarily teach in a class. But because of this, and for many other

reasons, I believe that it is the best tool for making work that defies definitions and crosses many boundaries and disciplines.

The nature of collaboration varies with each new group dynamic and every piece that is created. There are no set rules, with the exception of keeping an open mind and embracing the ideas, talents, and perspectives of every member of a given group. In doing so, new and beautiful work can always be created because it emerges out of each unique circumstance. People from a variety of different backgrounds can come together and make work that takes their own personal art to the next level because it is expanded by the others. Collaboration can only be learned by applying it to a variety of situations and seeing what works in each case.

Take it on home again Sophia! If we look at the over-arching paradigm, the nature of Interdisciplinary Artistic process—collaboration is the key ingredient.

So, if we zoom back out we can see that true interdisciplinary work is, in essence, a series of collaborations: collaboration between the elements of process; across the disciplines involved; between individual artists involved; between the space, process, artists and other people inhabiting the space; between the various production aspects; between the audience and the art; between the audience and performers and performance; between the audience and the venue/performance space/theater/ gallery; between the performer, audience and the 'rules of engagement'; between the neighborhood, community and site... When one really considers the micro to the macro, the various levels of collaboration at play, the list goes on and on...

Essentially, creating from the mind of an interdisciplinary maker requires creating in the mindset of collaborator. This implicitly acknowledges the inherent value of each component, system, discipline, field, philosophy, genre, space, and person(s), involved with the process. To understand the nature of interdisciplinary work is to believe in collaboration, and to place such a high value on the act of collaboration as to centralize one's entire process and practice on this foundation.