

Fostering Edgy Practice at the Intersection of Sound Art and Emergency Medicine

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In memory of Associate Clinical Professor Andrew Dent AM

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Abstract

How did the internationally acclaimed sound art and exploratory music festival, *Liquid Architecture* evolve? Can sound and music make a difference to the wellbeing of Emergency outpatients?

Developing practice-based research through student centred teaching and learning is vital if we are to develop an innovation framework in Australia for art education. By drawing upon synergies between art, industry and other disciplines for teaching and learning, researchers will encourage real-world experiences and establish partnerships for a vibrant research culture. This paper will demonstrate how student, artist and industry centred projects can act as conduits for connection, collaboration and impact in applied research settings; and how innovative teaching and learning projects can shift dialogues in art making and establish long-term collaborations with artists, cultural institutions, government and industry partners. The paper will discuss how partnerships and interdisciplinary projects with the *Liquid Architecture* sound art festival and the Emergency department, St Vincent's Hospital – Melbourne have evolved, and demonstrate how staff and students can facilitate research projects which forge dynamic cultural connections and make a difference to the way we listen to, view and inhabit our world.

Keywords: collaboration, sound, health

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Collaboration is tricky. It can lead us to new ways of making art and new modes for thinking about our place in the world. Collaboration can challenge us to develop an inclusive common language which transcends institutional barriers and jargon.

Collaboration can insist that we think outside the box; it can challenge us to create projects with methodologies that require internal review before the final outcome is presented to external audiences and stakeholders. Collaboration can change the way we learn, teach and research.

Incorporating the spirit of collaboration and interdisciplinary art practice into art schools, which have traditionally been modelled on an autonomous studio practice is a difficult but necessary task. Although collaborative practice is a buzzword for the art community, it is still a relatively new model for thinking in art schools. While some fine art disciplines have traditionally focused on students creating work individually, rather than in teams, time-based arts students have had to work collaboratively due to the nature of creating performance, audio recordings and screen-based works. In many instances, the time-based arts require a variety of expertise that an artist does not always have, and so they may draw on the assistance and input of others. Of course, there are many exceptions to this rule as students and artists constantly reinvent art practice due to the advent of new technologies, cultural change and interdisciplinary partnerships.

Through collaboration, we have the opportunity to work with others to brainstorm, dialogue, create work, solve problems and dream. Interdisciplinary collaborations are important to cultural dialogues, innovation and the advancement of civil society. This paper will discuss how partnerships and collaborative projects with the *Liquid Architecture* sound art festival and the Emergency department, St Vincent's Hospital – Melbourne have evolved, and demonstrate how academic staff, researchers and students can facilitate research projects which forge dynamic cultural connections.

Liquid Architecture

Liquid Architecture <http://www.liquidarchitecture.org.au> is an annual festival that promotes concepts and practices informing sound art and exploratory music through its extensive publication, exhibition and performance programs. Nat Bates, an RMIT School of Art student, founded the Festival in 2000 to provide young and emerging artists opportunities to engage with critically informed audiences within sympathetic presentation contexts. Nat was an undergraduate student who specialised in sound art and improvised music and appeared to be excluded from participating in high profile art events due to his student status. Using the resources, knowledge and support of RMIT Union Arts and the Sound area in the School of Art, the inaugural *Liquid Architecture* highlighted the diversity of Melbourne's sound culture and generated critical feedback, networking opportunities and public exposure for the local artists featured in the Festival.¹

Sound culture is informed by ideas and activities that operate outside normal musical conventions to highlight innovative and challenging forms of expression, presentation and engagement with audiences. Traditional notions of music are generally grounded in pitch whereby harmony and melody provide the structural foundation, and musical performances are usually presented from the proscenium of a concert hall with an emphasis on virtuosity and complexity. Musical components that are usually exalted as the pinnacle of artistic expression in Western art music (virtuosity, bombast, and melodrama) are the very elements that the musical avant-garde have attempted to undermine over the past one hundred and twenty five years. Rather than taking its cues from the rarefied atmosphere of the concert hall, sound culture is shaped by a provocative and idiosyncratic range of artists and art movements who find inspiration in noise, chance, chaos, appropriation, improvisation, immersion, found sound, and psycho-acoustic phenomena as a means of extending our knowledge, perception and experience of music. Despite the rhetoric of provocation and confrontation, much of the sound installation and performance work produced for *Liquid Architecture* has been delicate, rigorous, evocative, poetic and immersive.²

Developing a sympathetic yet innovative set of presentation strategies is crucial to the awareness and appreciation of contemporary sound art and exploratory music. *Liquid Architecture* has been exemplary with its inventive presentation of artists work over the last nine years, providing an extraordinary range of venues for Festival artists including RMIT Storey Hall, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Old

Melbourne Gaol, North Melbourne Town Hall, Melbourne Planetarium, West Space and the RMIT underground car park.

Figure 1

Dean Linguey

Performing live at Liquid Architecture 8 (Melbourne)

2007

Sound performance

Photographer: Christina Tester

Now in its ninth year with annual funding, *Liquid Architecture* has positioned itself as the major Australian festival devoted to sound culture and is supported by a variety of cultural organisations including Arts Victoria, the Australia Council for the Arts, City of Melbourne, Arts Queensland, the French Embassy, and the Goethe Institute to name but a few. RMIT sound students and staff in collaboration with RMIT Union Arts, have toured the Festival to capital cities and regional centres throughout Australia, and expanded the curatorial vision by featuring significant national and international artists in the Festival program. Although Nat Bates is currently engaged in Doctoral research, he continues to direct *Liquid Architecture* in consultation with interstate and regional partners, and has student volunteers running the day-to-day operation of the event in Melbourne. Despite the exponential growth of the enterprise, the curatorial policy of privileging young and emerging artists remains the cornerstone of the Festival's vision.

Learning on the job

Liquid Architecture is unique in that it is directed and managed by a group of undergraduate and post-graduate students in collaboration with industry partners. The Festival is a platform for students to develop curatorial and managerial skills, and specialist technical knowledge of live sound mixing, sound reinforcement and installation. As *Liquid Architecture* has grown in ambition, the performing arts program has become more sophisticated in order to reflect contemporary developments around extended improvisational technique, live audio-visual performance and surround sound spatialisation: all of which demands complex technical support. As part of *Liquid Architecture's* marketing and promotion strategy, a catalogue is produced each year comprising specially commissioned recordings from

artists participating in the Festival. The catalogue is usually produced by a team of students who are involved in various aspects of the process - from the collation and mastering of the audio material to the final design of the publication. The creative program often includes a pedagogical component in which invited artists present workshops or master classes on themes such as composition, improvisation and instrument building. This enables audiences and organisers to acquire first-hand knowledge of the formal and conceptual themes informing each artist's work. It also provides a good opportunity for networking as the workshops provide access to expertise that is often unavailable or difficult to attain. Finally the benefits of programming young and emerging artists with renowned practitioners is immeasurable. Working in close proximity to experienced artists provides exposure to and understanding of their concepts and methodologies, whilst providing an opportunity for an exchange of ideas and insights. The Festival also provides a context and mechanism in which emerging artists can think more ambitiously about their work as they can draw upon the experience of the curatorial and technical team to help facilitate their artistic vision.

Figure 2

Greg Davis and Jeph Jerman

Performing live at Liquid Architecture 7 (Melbourne)

2006

Sound performance

Photographer: Christina Tester

Although the benefits of *Liquid Architecture* are significant for people participating in the general organization and artistic vision of the Festival, it is in the classroom where its true contribution can be measured. Here students are introduced to a wide assortment of ideas shaping sound culture ranging from curation and arts management, to conceptual, formal, aesthetic, philosophical and theoretical issues informing discourses in contemporary composition, publication and presentation. *Liquid Architecture* provides students with an active framework to experience and reflect upon ideas generated from the creative work that it produces each year. Therefore a synergetic relationship is forged between the Festival and classrooms as students are not only introduced to a historical or theoretical set of references, but are also provided first-hand experience of these references through *Liquid Architecture*. For instance, discussions between high profile sound practitioners and the students on movements such as electronic music, musique concrete, minimalism or soundscape enrich

the understanding and appreciation of these historical movements through the prism of contemporary practices articulated by the artists featured in the Festival.

Future Sound

In 2009 *Liquid Architecture* will celebrate its tenth anniversary. To celebrate a decade of commitment and hard work, a publication will be produced to summarise the organisation's achievements. The publication will comprise a series of essays written by artists who have been involved in the Festival and focus on historical movements in sound culture, practice led research and artist interviews. Through this publication, *Liquid Architecture* will fill the gap that exists in publications devoted to this area and position Australian sound culture within a broader international discourse. Students and alumni will also contribute to the publication to continue the tradition of student led learning and professional development that *Liquid Architecture* has been so good at fostering.

With student centred projects and industry partnerships important to the university sector, it is crucial that a model for collaborative practice (as we have demonstrated through the success of *Liquid Architecture*) be harnessed in art schools. Without a university approach to collaborative practice the process of capacity building through teamwork would be non-existent. We would lack the opportunity to develop new languages and approaches to the society in which we live. A collaborative practice engenders responsibility for the very simple fact that one engages in teamwork where one has to respect other people's opinion, expertise and input. We turn now to a series of projects situated in a Melbourne hospital which demonstrate how undergraduate collaborations can lead to long term applied research.

Projects in hospital settings

Since 2005, RMIT University School of Art undergraduate students enrolled in the Internship Program and Collaborative Practice courses in the BA Fine Art have produced a number of art projects especially designed for St Vincent's Hospital – Melbourne.

For the Internship Program course, an RMIT art student is selected by the Hospital Curatorial Committee to produce a body of work during their studio based artist residency in the second semester of the academic year. An artwork produced during

the residency is subsequently donated into the Hospital's extensive cultural collection. Significant financial and in-kind resources have been provided by the Hospital for the creation of Internship Program and Collaborative Practice projects, which have included photomedia work, DVDs, a kite and a garden. As a result of these commissions, RMIT students' artworks are included in the Hospital's collection and displayed throughout a number of the Hospital's campuses across Melbourne. During the creation of the artworks, students have been sensitive to the hospital environment, patient demographic and the Hospital's values of compassion, justice, human dignity, excellence and unity. From inception to completion, the projects developed for the Hospital have yielded real-world experiences for the students through their constant dialogue and interaction with Hospital staff from the Emergency, Marketing and Curatorial departments.

In 2005, thirteen Collaborative Practice undergraduate students from the School of Art at RMIT University worked on a DVD commission initiated by the Emergency Department at St Vincent's Hospital - Melbourne. The Emergency Department is located in inner-city Fitzroy and serves a diverse population which includes people from socially disadvantaged groups, elderly people and people affected by illicit drug and alcohol use and mental health issues. Commissioned by the late Associate Clinical Professor Andrew Dent AM and the Hospital Curator, Julie Lewis, the students task was to work as a production team to produce a DVD of short videos and animations for Emergency patients. The Emergency Department generously initiated staffing and financial support of \$5000 for the technical infrastructure and equipment for the DVD project.

As a result of this Andrew Dent, Julie Lewis and Sue Cowling, the Director of Nursing for the Emergency Department at St Vincent Hospital – Melbourne were involved in regular discussions with the students, and in making decisions about the content of the DVD throughout the production process. Throughout 2005, the RMIT art students worked as a production team to research, develop and produce the compilation DVD, which was made available in 2006 for viewing and listening to by patients residing in an Observation Ward in the Emergency Department.

For the project, a student researched and benchmarked the nexus between art and health and the role of art in hospital settings. The students working on the DVD

discussed what it would be like to lie in a hospital bed waiting for medical attention and produced work which addressed the need for family, to be distracted, amused and cared for.³ Emergency medicine staff and the Hospital curator met with the students during a reconnaissance visit by the students to the Emergency Department to inform the students about the day-to-day functioning of the ED, and the hospital experience of Emergency patients. The Hospital staff also participated in a quality control forum with the students to contribute to the post production of their work and ensure that the videos and animations on the DVD would not upset Hospital staff or patients.⁴

Final decisions and consensus about the content and production of the animations and the videos created for the DVD were made by the student group in tandem with discussion held with the Collaborative Practice lecturer and the staff from St Vincent's Hospital - Melbourne.⁵ The DVD project was an important learning experience for the students in collaboration and consensus decision making.

Figure 3

Asmund Heimark, Stephen Downward and Melinda Ballard

Animation excerpt from *Keith*

2005

Animation, DVD

Still image: Asmund Heimark

The DVD project (titled *Keith*) was formally launched at the Hospital in March 2006.⁶ Patients viewed the videos and animation on the DVD via television monitors linked to a central DVD player, and heard the audio through disposable headsets donated by Qantas Airways. Once the DVD was launched and available for viewing, a questionnaire was given to a small cohort of Emergency patients to ascertain whether art would have a constructive place in the Emergency Department, and how art could assist the time patients spent in this department.⁷ The results of these questionnaires indicated that 83 percent of patients (15 of 18 patients surveyed with the questionnaires) felt that time seemed to be prolonged while 89 percent (16 of the 18 patients) indicated that the availability of music would have improved their Emergency Department experience. As a result of the innovative work by the undergraduate students, Associate Clinical Professor Andrew Dent AM asked researchers in the School of Art to collaborate on a long-term research project with staff based in the Emergency Department.

Figure 4

Patient watching *Keith* DVD in the Emergency Department, St Vincent's Hospital – Melbourne

Keith

2005

DVD

Photographer: Margund Sallowsky

Designing Sound for Health and Wellbeing

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the art students' innovative work set the ground for the development of the long-term applied research project. *Designing Sound for Health and Wellbeing* is an interdisciplinary and collaborative project which is currently being conducted by researchers from the School of Art and St Vincent's Hospital - Melbourne to provide a new perspective on the effect of sound and music on the health and the wellbeing of patients located in the Emergency Department. From 2008-2010 this research will be supported under the Australian Research Council's *Linkage Projects* funding scheme (project number LP0882346) and carried out by an interdisciplinary team of researchers.⁸

The relationship between art and science, the humanities and medicine has a significant history with incursions in this field including anatomy studies by painters such as Leonardo da Vinci and visual reproductions of medical dissections by Rembrandt van Rijn (Kemp & Wallace, 2000). More recently, artists have been invited or commissioned to exhibit visual artworks in hospitals to make the hospital experience less daunting for patients, their carers, loved ones and hospital staff, and UK hospitals such as the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital (London) and the Royal Brompton Hospital (London) have developed international profiles for their extensive art collections, art commissions and research into the relationship of art to human health and wellbeing (Lelchuk Staricoff et al. 2001; Mitchell & Dose, 2004). In Australia, hospitals such as St Vincent's Hospital – Melbourne, Austin Health and Western Health – Sunshine Hospital have extensive art programs, which include artist in residence projects and the display of artworks throughout the Hospital campuses.

The aim of *Designing Sound for Health and Wellbeing* is to provide research in a field where there are multiple examples of music being performed or listened to in hospital settings but little applied research to assess patient responses to the function of soundscapes and electronic music in Emergency Departments. Our model for collaboration draws on this field, and our interdisciplinary team of composers, musicians, art scholars, writers, emergency medicine practitioners and a clinical health psychologist are currently developing research to test whether sound and music can affect the physical wellbeing and anxiety levels of Emergency patients. A PhD candidate who has a significant profile in electro-acoustic music joined the team in 2008 to contribute to the development and production of the musical compositions and the analysis of the final outcomes. The inclusion of a doctoral candidate in the interdisciplinary team provides a collaborative and supportive model for post graduate study and extends the creative and knowledge base of the team.

Our preference for researching the use of sound and music in an Emergency department draws on international research on the display of art in hospital settings, interdisciplinary projects undertaken by artists and scientists and our knowledge of the impact that audio and binaural beats can have on relieving human anxiety. The research team will create soundscapes and electro-acoustic musical compositions, to trial these audio works and measure patients' level of anxiety and satisfaction with their Emergency attendance. Patients included in the trial will listen to the soundscapes and musical compositions through headphones and demonstrate the effect the compositions had on them through questionnaires. The outcomes of this research will be disseminated nationally and internationally.

There is no reason why students and artists cannot be seen and counted as active researchers. It is crucial in an era of new measurements for research outputs, that art schools develop methodologies which position student centred learning as a passport to research. As the projects discussed in this paper attest, collaborations between students, academics and external stakeholders can lead to firm industry partnerships and projects which are competitive for research funding. Artists are exceptionally good at receiving funding and awards for their practice, but are often hesitant to test the research funding programs of organisations such as the Australian Research Council. As we have discovered, artists' contribution to knowledge is as valuable as medical practitioners – especially if we work together. Developing practice-based research through student centred teaching and learning is vital if we are to develop an

innovation framework in Australia for art education. By drawing upon synergies between art, industry and other disciplines for teaching and learning, researchers will encourage real-world experiences and establish partnerships for a vibrant research culture.

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Endnotes

¹ Information on *Liquid Architecture* for this paper stem from a series of conversations Dr Philip Samartzis had with Nat Bates between 2001 and 2008.

² To verify this observation please refer to *Realtime* at <<http://www.realttimearts.net>> for its series of reviews of *Liquid Architecture* since 2000.

³ Research for the project included a literature review of art projects situated in Hospitals and art projects which addressed human health and wellbeing. Collaborative Practice students met on a weekly basis during the 2005 academic year to discuss the production of the project, books and journal articles found through the literature review by the student researcher, and the content of the animations and videos which were created especially for the DVD.

⁴ The students also presented their videos and animations to artists visiting the School of Art to get feedback and advice from artists who were not involved with the project. As a result of discussion and presentation forums with Hospital staff and the visiting artists, the students received critical feedback which informed the realisation of the final DVD. While most of the feedback sessions were constructive, one session with a visiting artist was notably animated. Critical feedback by the visiting artist and fellow students led to a group of students changing the sound featured in their video because it was deemed inappropriate for viewing and listening in an Hospital Emergency Department context.

⁵ Dr Keely Macarow was the Collaborative Practice lecturer who coordinated the *Keith* DVD project.

⁶ See Nader, Carol, "At the Movies: Hospital patients get dose of artwork." *The Age*, 3 April 2006, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/at-the-movies-hospital-patients-get-dose-of-artwork/2006/04/02/1143916408968.html>>

for further details about the *Keith* DVD project for St Vincent's Hospital – Melbourne.

⁷ Emergency patients were not included in any discussions or given surveys or questionnaires discussing the project during the development and production of the DVD. This was due to the wishes and protocol of the Hospital.

⁸ The Chief Investigators for the *Designing Sound for Health and Wellbeing* project are Professor Elizabeth Grierson, Dr Philip Samartzis and Dr Keely Macarow, the Partner Investigators are Professor George Jelinek, Dr Tracey Weiland and Dr Craig Winter and the PhD candidate is David Brown. Associate Clinical Professor Andrew Dent was a Partner Investigator for the project until his death in June 2008. As a result of this, Dr Craig Winter, the current Director of Emergency, St Vincent's Hospital - Melbourne joined the project's research team in August 2008.