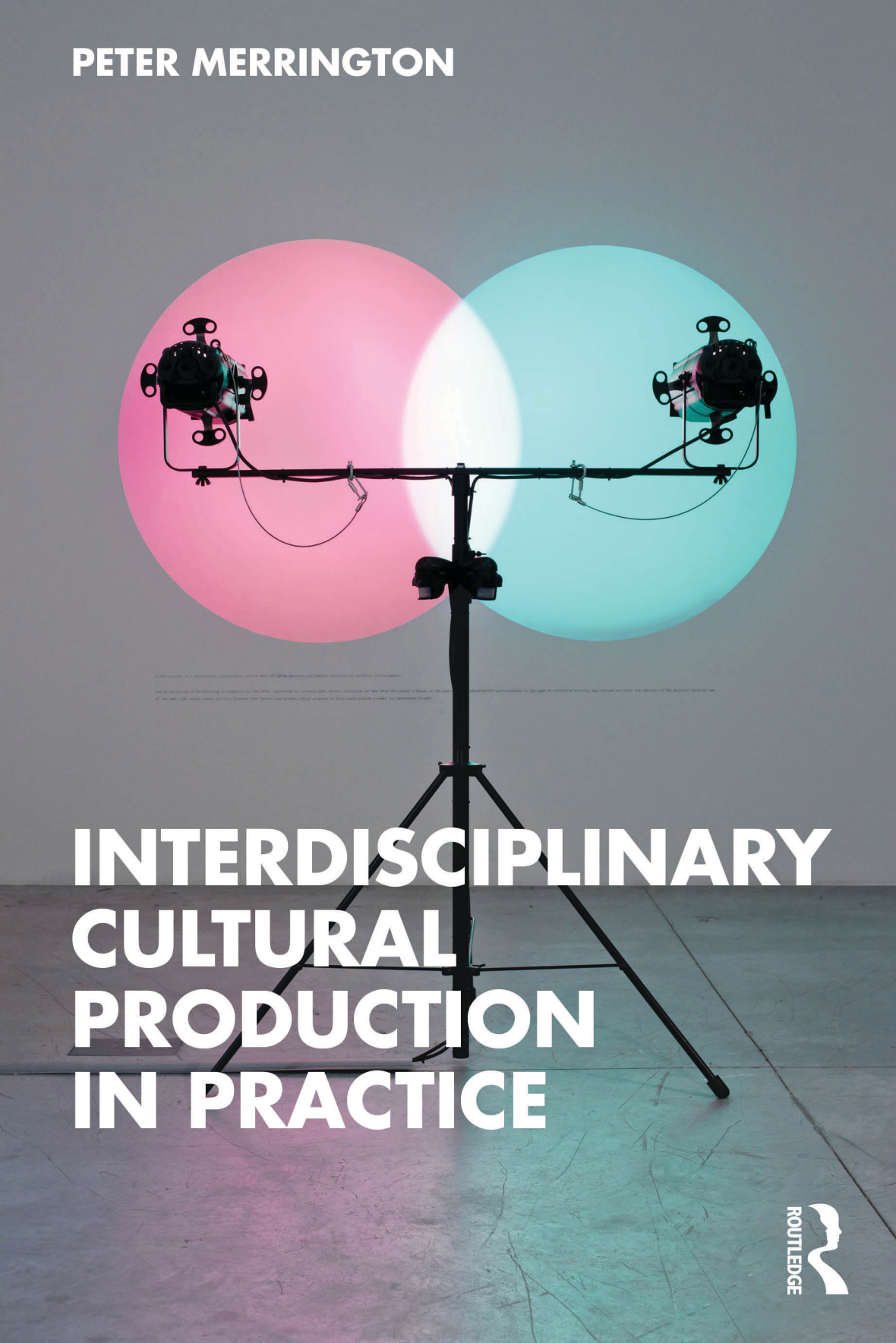
PETER MERRINGTON



INTERDISCIPLINARY CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN PRACTICE

ROUTLEDGE

INTERDISCIPLINARY CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN PRACTICE

Combining history, theory, case studies and practical guidance, this book offers a critical introduction to interdisciplinary production in the arts and cultural industries.

Taking a production studies approach, the book examines how arts and cultural organisations produce and present new work that integrates knowledge and working methods from different disciplines, while accounting for cultural policy, funding and audiences. It provides rich and detailed case studies of interdisciplinary production in practice across a range of international contexts. Rather than taking a specific art form as a starting point, the author focuses on the strategic act of conjunction and considers examples across multiple art forms including the visual and performing arts and beyond. Whilst providing historical and theoretical contextualisation, this book primarily focuses on new, accessible ways to both understand the promise of interdisciplinarity and execute its creation.

As the first text to examine the working process of creating complex interdisciplinary cultural projects, this book will be of interest to advanced students in various creative disciplines, including media production, cultural industries and arts management, and curating.

Peter Merrington is a Lecturer in the Business of the Creative and Cultural Industries at the School of Arts and Creative Technologies, University of York, UK.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinary cultural production in practice

This book is about how and why arts and cultural organisations seek to connect, reorganise and integrate art forms and knowledge disciplines into new configurations and conjunctions as part of their work. It is about what this activity promises in terms of breaking conventions, of innovation, of novelty, of reaching new audiences and how the spaces built by arts organisations to hold and support such practices achieve these objectives. While interdisciplinarity may be predominantly associated with academic research and is common jargon in academic discourse, it is also increasingly prevalent in arts management, where cultural managers, producers and curators may regularly deploy interdisciplinarity as a particular ethos, although it is rarely interrogated in a rigorous way. At worst, this usage can become performative, verging on quasi-intellectualism and pretension. This book addresses that gap by offering a rigorous consideration of interdisciplinarity as a concept and a mode of cultural production, with a particular emphasis on the creation of new work by arts organisations.

If we take the 'inter' element of interdisciplinarity to simply mean 'between', this offers a valuable sense of flexibility and indeterminacy; its nature is determined by what, exactly, it seeks to bring together and how. As Moran (2010:14) notes, to fix the meaning of interdisciplinarity would be to 'discipline' it and set it within confined conventions. This book broadly defines interdisciplinary cultural production as any form of dialogue, synthesis, or interaction between two or more distinct disciplines where the interaction's mode, form, purpose and effect must be considered. Generally, it is a process where components from multiple art forms or disciplines, ones that do not conventionally collaborate, come together to create something new that is not reducible to the single components involved. This approach

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aligns with Moran's (2010:13) view of interdisciplinarity as the reorganisation of knowledge out of established disciplines 'into new configurations and alliances,' often in reaction to ways of thinking that appear 'stale, irrelevant, inflexible or exclusory.' At this stage it is important to distinguish this from multidisciplinarity, which represents juxtaposition and proximity without direct attempts at collaboration or integration (Klein, 1990). While some art forms, like filmmaking or performing arts, are inherently collaborative, involving specialists in defined roles (directing, writing, lighting, sound etc.), this is not the focus here. Instead, this book is concerned with arts organisations that demonstrate a commitment to working in an interdisciplinary mode to actively challenge conventions through the conjunction of divergent practices and knowledge. The focus is on non-profit arts organisations operating outside of the academy that commission or create new interdisciplinary work where a central approach is to integrate knowledge from divergent disciplines, work that is not easily assimilated into existing institutional forms. This framing raises a core question, similar to that posed by sociologist Howard Becker (1982:28): 'how do non standard works ever get exhibited, performed, or distributed?' Since disciplinarity is the default, and novelty and complexity increase the financial and aesthetic risk of failure, this book investigates how this non-standard work gets made. We explore the role of arts organisations, and the cultural managers and producers who lead them, in simultaneously supporting, establishing, controlling disciplinary boundaries and seeking to challenge them through interdisciplinary means. Furthermore, we seek to understand why interdisciplinarity is assumed to be a necessary or important ambition in the context of arts production.

The impetus for this book is multifaceted. While there is a substantial, wide-ranging body of existing scholarship on interdisciplinary work, it remains fragmented. This includes significant work on interdisciplinary art (Cecchetto et al, 2008; Augsburg, 2017); literature on the convergence of art, science, and technology (Rogers et al, 2021); and a broad, if disjointed, field of study covering the historic and contemporary integration of art forms, such as music and visual art (Shaw-Miller, 2004), within visual arts (Hughes and Lafortune, 2001), expanded practices like post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann, 2006), and reconfigured social relations (Kester, 2004; Bishop, 2012). There are also practical guides for collaborative contexts (Morrison, 2022) and valuable reflections from practitioners and curators who have extensively worked in interdisciplinary contexts (Triscott, 2017; Triscott and Santomauro, 2021).

Despite this existing landscape, there has been limited focused scholarship into the organisations operating outside of the academy that privilege interdisciplinarity in their work. Specifically, there has been limited in-depth examination of the complex questions and negotiations that arts and cultural organisations face when amalgamating arts and non-arts disciplines. This focus is particularly crucial for smaller arts organisations, where experimentation and

risk are central to their development of new work. This study seeks to account for this as well as the cultural policy context in which they operate, how they sustain themselves financially, and how they seek to connect with or engage particular publics and audiences. This practical, organisational perspective is important because it is frequently arts and cultural managers, leaders, and producers who instigate this kind of work, bring practitioners from different disciplines into conjunction, and take on key facilitation and mediation roles in the process of collaboration. It is to this gap, the lack of rigorous examination into the how and why of organisational practice in interdisciplinary arts management, that this book seeks to contribute.

Secondly, a better understanding of this work in practice is prompted by the increasing privilege afforded to interdisciplinary methods by arts funding agencies, cultural policymakers, and cultural institutions. In this context, there is often an underlying assumption that interdisciplinary approaches are inherently superior to conventional, discipline-specific work, on the grounds that traditional disciplines and established art forms are siloed and outmoded. There is a sense that conventional forms hinder, rather than enable, effective engagement with the complexity of the contemporary world. Consequently, interdisciplinary practice is presented as a mechanism to yield a broad range of valuable outcomes, primarily in the domains of innovation and the capacity to effectively engage with complex problems. This mandate is clearly evident in the promotion of interdisciplinarity as the vital route to address major crises such as climate change, to foster the social understanding of science, and to generate innovation through the adoption of new technologies. The prioritisation of interdisciplinary research as a strategy for understanding and tackling major crises has been mirrored, to a certain degree, within the arts and cultural sector. However, as is clear from the academic literature, the concept has at times been mistakenly championed as a panacea – a kind of shortcut or quick-fix route to novelty and innovation, or as the default way to engage with complex issues (Klein and Philipp, 2023). As Barry and Born (2013) observe, interdisciplinarity has emerged as a key political preoccupation, yet the term often tends to obscure as much as it illuminates.

This strategic framing is exemplified at the level of international cultural policy by the EU-funded Cultural Relations Platform. Seeking to 'strengthen the EU's ability to engage meaningfully with different audiences and stakeholders,' the Platform employs its Global Cultural Relations Programme as a primary mode of achieving these aims (Cultural Relations Platform, 2025). This short, intense professional training event, which began in 2016, originally focused on network building among cultural professionals. However, in 2023, it shifted to an explicit interdisciplinary approach, directly connecting cultural professionals with a non-arts discipline, focusing on climate change in 2023 and 'safer societies' in 2024. The intention, as articulated by the platform, is to provide 'a unique opportunity and space for innovative discussions and

exchanging ideas with peers who have a strong willingness to contribute to a more interdisciplinary and sustainable world' (Cultural Relations Platform, 2023). Through intense dialogue and exchange, the programme strategically seeks to form social bonds and educate practitioners from different disciplines, thus building a professional network that links cultural producers with the potential for future collaboration. While no formal outputs are required, the underlying logic is that these new relationships will lead to future action, positioning the programme as both a driver of innovation and a form of cultural diplomacy. This is just one recent instance where interdisciplinarity is employed as a key route to innovation, and various others are examined throughout this book. The urgency to address issues that are too complex for any single field has thus positioned interdisciplinarity as the presumptive approach for arts organisations seeking to move beyond conventional forms of practice and address challenging global concerns, including systemic injustices, the climate crisis and digital transformation. While this framework has been used to justify the synthesis of tools, methods, and concepts from other fields, this thinking has been adopted by cultural policymakers and arts organisations with limited critical consideration of what interdisciplinarity entails or how it can be effectively developed in practice. This lack of scrutiny highlights a significant gap: there has been little empirical research or scholarship in arts management examining how and why organisations successfully, or unsuccessfully, work through these modes of interdisciplinary practice. This book begins to address that deficiency by seeking to better understand the practical production and outcomes of these complex projects.

Another motivating factor for this book is the need to understand the wider appeal of interdisciplinary work for artists, curators, cultural managers, and producers. As interviews with cultural producers undertaken for this research suggest, one of the primary draws is that working in this mode is perceived as exciting, cutting-edge, and risky, embodying a sense of inherent progressiveness. This stands in contrast to the perception of rigid, often market-oriented replication of practice associated with disciplinary art forms. One of the other fundamental appeals of interdisciplinarity is that it can be utilised as a strategic means for status mobility, allowing individuals and organisations to elevate their standing through association with higher-status bodies of knowledge and powerful institutional actors. The high demand for such interdisciplinary opportunities underscores this appeal. For instance, the Arts at CERN programme recently reported it received 718 applications from 91 countries for its Collide Copenhagen residency, celebrating the 'outstanding quality and daring with bold and innovative ideas' in every proposal (Arts at CERN, 2024). This demand raises questions not only about the precarity of artists and the general dearth of opportunities, but also about why interdisciplinarity is considered essential to artistic self-conception in contemporary society. Ultimately, this appeal points to a danger – that

interdisciplinarity is viewed as a shortcut, a quick route to innovation and novelty, or that curiosity, nothing in itself to be discouraged, leads to forms of disciplinary tourism. This assumption often obscures the wider questions surrounding the practical management of these complex relationships: What, precisely, are the rigorous modes of interdisciplinary collaboration needed to develop new cultural work, and what are the considerable risks and hazards of working outside one's established discipline?

My own experience, both producing new interdisciplinary projects in arts management contexts and teaching cultural management students through live interdisciplinary briefs with cultural partners, confirms that collaboration in this mode is far from an easy route; in fact, the opposite is often true. It is a fraught process with uncertain outcomes. The inherent danger is that cultural production lacking valid justifications or rigorous methods simply produces an indistinct medley, a dull miscellany, or an odd, unexamined juxtaposition. This book is therefore driven by the need to work through the gap between the idealised rhetoric of innovation and the challenging reality of effective interdisciplinary practice.

The overarching methodological approach for this book is developed from production studies, a framework originally developed within media and cultural studies (Mayer et al., 2009). This choice is central to the book's aim – to move beyond an aesthetic or critical reading of interdisciplinary cultural projects and instead to provide a rigorous, practical, and systemic understanding of why this practice occurs, how it is accomplished, and what the strategic implications are for cultural managers and organisations. Traditionally, production studies focus on the context, process, and politics surrounding the creation and distribution of media artifacts. It is an explicitly holistic approach that seeks to understand the myriad factors that shape cultural output, from the initial conceptualisation through to its final distribution and reception. This framework systematically examines the step-by-step creation process across multiple analytical scales, which include – the practicalities of production, technical factors, questions of collaborative labour, and the realities of work and conflict in practice at the micro-level. As well as the meso-level management decision-making processes, resource allocation, internal management structures, and organisational culture. And the macro-level context of wider industry standards, policy and regulatory frameworks, questions of funding and financing, and the political economy of culture.

In this book, the production studies methodology is strategically deployed to address the unique complexities of interdisciplinary creative projects. In practice, this means shifting the analytical focus from the individual project outcome to the institutional and relational dynamics required to realise it. This approach requires paying granular attention to the lived experiences of the individuals involved, artists, producers, and managers, and understanding their decision-making processes, experiences of collaboration, negotiation,

and conflict inherent in working with distinct fields. This approach led to an exploratory, multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2018) to facilitate an in-depth investigation into the complex, real-world context. It means examining the organisational modes and structures that are specifically developed to mediate and produce interdisciplinary work, asking how these structures are informed by, and respond to, wider economic and institutional pressures. By focusing on the intricacies of the creative process of conjunction, production studies allow the structural requirements and mediatory logics of interdisciplinary practice to come to the forefront. Using this methodology, the book structures its empirical investigation around five central analytical areas. These areas collectively map the lifecycle and context of interdisciplinary projects: (1) The cultural and political economy – examining the funding, finance, and resource allocation within the broader cultural and political economy that enables (or constrains) interdisciplinary production. This includes cultural policy, public and philanthropic investment. (2) The production process and relational work: considering how interdisciplinary cultural projects are made, from initial conception and ideation through to final realisation. This area interrogates who is involved, the various roles they play, and the mechanisms by which relationships, labour, and creative differences are convened, negotiated, and managed. (3) Contextual parameters and materiality: analysing the social, cultural, spatial, and temporal parameters in which the projects take place. This includes the subtle influences of disciplinary relationships (i.e., between art form categories), the specific sites of production, and the materiality involved, from the creative materials and technologies utilised to the physical objects and organisational documentation produced. (4) The organisational modes and structures – the structures specifically developed to mediate and produce interdisciplinary work, asking how these structures are informed by, and respond to, wider economic and institutional pressures or objectives. (5) Distribution, publics, and audiences – investigating the strategies for disseminating the work, the relationship with critics and publics, and the role of the organisations as mediators between the artists, the funding bodies, and the participants or audiences.

The core of the research employs a qualitative methodological framework incorporating several data-gathering techniques. The primary data source consists of a series of 19 anonymous and non-anonymous semi-structured, in-depth narrative interviews. These interviews were conducted with key producers, managers, curators, and artistic directors, all centrally involved in the commissioning, development, and realisation of interdisciplinary projects across a range of different organisations. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of individuals with specific, deep knowledge and experience. This allowed for the collection of rich, contextualised data and personal accounts of the production process. In addition, the methodological framework incorporated analysis of archival and contextual

sources, grey literature, which included organisational documents, marketing, internal reports, and social media communications. This was supplemented by a policy analysis of relevant policy and strategy documents, research reports, and funding applications. To understand the reception and public positioning of the work, the research involved a systematic analysis of media coverage and critical reviews. Additional contextual data was gathered through interviews with artists and cultural producers associated with the case studies, as well as the analysis of video and audio documentation of public events such as talks, discussions, and symposia. The book's key case studies were selected because of their distinctive and expressed commitment to interdisciplinarity as a core mode of production. The focus is primarily on non-profit, small-to-medium-scale arts organisations operating outside of traditional academic contexts. The common thread is the particular form of interdisciplinarity expressed within their working processes and organisational structures, in a way that does not restrict them to a single art form. This strategic selection allows for the derivation of broader, more transferable insights about interdisciplinary cultural production. Focusing the analysis at the organisational level is intentional, as it allows for an examination of institutional obligations to funders and to publics, as well as a detailed study of their production and mediatory roles. With such a broad frame, there is no sense that the book is attempting to be comprehensive; many significant projects, organisations, and approaches have not been covered due to pragmatic constraints associated with geography, time, access, and language. However, the book is intentionally international in its outlook and case study selection. This decision is motivated by a critical desire to move beyond the traditional dominance of European and US-centric histories of interdisciplinary arts. While this international perspective is necessarily qualified by the accessibility of English-language materials and interview access, the book aims to begin the process of providing a more geographically and culturally diverse perspective on interdisciplinary cultural production.

To a certain extent the trajectory of the book aims to follow the production lifecycle and context of interdisciplinary projects. The next chapter begins by setting the foundation through considering the interdisciplinary impulse in contemporary arts commissioning from the perspective of cultural production and arts management. We move beyond an oversimplified notion of novelty and innovation, arguing that a productive approach must first acknowledge and actively engage with the inherent tensions of disciplinarity. Disciplines are not fixed silos, but dynamic assemblages; therefore, meaningful boundary transgression requires practitioners to possess both a strong disciplinary grounding and the critical openness to challenge those conventions. The chapter identifies the complex, often entangled motivations for pursuing interdisciplinary cultural production – the desire for radical transformation, the pressure for utility (instrumentalisation to meet external demands), and the pursuit of innovation often linked to resources and audiences. This chapter

provides the practical and operational insights to aid cultural managers navigate the dilemmas of instrumentalisation and seek rigor in practice.

From this broad opening perspective, in Chapter 3 the book then turns to look at the macro-level, through a specific national case study – the complex and often fragile funding ecosystem supporting interdisciplinary cultural production in the UK since 2010. While the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity, often tied to innovation, technology adoption, and commercialisation, has successfully advocated for new investment, cultural managers and producers face uncertainty navigating funding schemes that remain primarily focused on disciplinary objectives. The post-2010 austerity-led funding cuts reduced the appetite for artistic risk-taking and experimentation, but despite this, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, especially with technologists, has been a central, if loosely positioned, policy priority for UK arts councils. The chapter examines the organisational forms of interdisciplinary cultural production, from it being a central curatorial concern, to it being strategically developed as an 'adjunct practice' that allow organisations to pursue innovation, diversify funding, and manage reputational risks without compromising their core artistic focus.

Chapter 4 articulates a framework defining the central parameters of interdisciplinary cultural production across different institutional contexts, with a specific focus on spatiality and temporality. The analysis is structured around key thematic areas: effective project structure and design, strategic functions, the consideration of time, place, and process, and the underpinning institutional logics. These themes are examined through a comprehensive series of organisational and project case studies. The discussion begins with the short, intensive artist-technologist collaborations staged by the New York-based net art organisation, Rhizome, in their *Seven on Seven* programme, and subsequently addresses the long-term, situated projects of Arts Catalyst in regional England. Further sections consider the public art collaborations of artist Katie Paterson and architects Zeller & Moye in the UK and US and explore the studio as a responsive site of collaboration through the creative methodologies of The Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg. The analysis then examines how AfroAsia in South Korea mediates the postcolonial present within its local neighbourhood. Finally, the focus turns to the festival as a cultural form and a key site and instigator of interdisciplinary cultural production. This phenomenon is examined through three distinct case studies: Pan-African cultural festivals in the 1960s and 1970s, the founding programme of the Manchester International Festival in 2007 and the Shanghai Project in 2016. The final chapter addresses a core tension inherent in interdisciplinary cultural production: the potential for audience discomfort and alienation caused by challenging established conventions, which must be balanced against an organisation's institutional need to justify and value public engagement. The analysis proceeds from the premise that interdisciplinary work

is inherently risky for cultural organisations, as audiences may be alienated by perceived complexity, feel patronised by superficial execution, or perceive the work as reduced to mere spectacle. But the chapter also more generally seeks to account for how the audience is conceived in relation to interdisciplinary cultural projects – which is often through an objective of 'eliminating,' 'educating,' or 'developing' the audience. This can create a challenging dynamic for publicly funded organisations, which must balance the mandate for broad public relevance with the reality that the actual audience for highly innovative work is often a narrow, adventurous, elite group that embraces ambiguity. Therefore, to successfully manage these inherent risks and fulfil the promises of this kind of cultural production, the chapter considers the strategic approaches producers must adopt toward the audience.

In its totality, this book seeks to serve as an intervention into a field often obscured by superficial jargon and unexamined rhetoric. It critically interrogates the difficult dualities inherent in this work: the organisational need for stability versus the creative impulse for innovation, and the mandate for broad public engagement versus the reality of niche, risk-taking activities. By grounding the analysis in detailed case studies and the production studies framework, it provides a critical map for cultural managers, producers, and scholars to better understand interdisciplinary cultural production in practice. Consequently, the study asserts the necessary basis for rigorous practice.

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