

DRAFT

PROPOSAL TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization in Fine Arts for artists in all fields

at The Ohio State University

Sponsors:

**The Program in Creative Writing
(The Department of English)**

The Department of Theater

The Department of Dance

Proposed additional sponsors:

The Department of Art

The School of Music

The College of the Arts

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WE LIVE in a world of ever-increasing specialization, even as—paradoxically enough—the *idea* of interdisciplinarity is touted as the wave of the future (indeed, the wave of the *now*). But the tension between the single-minded focus on excellence in a narrow, highly defined area, and the appeal of a broad, multifaceted understanding (along with boundary-crossing and collaboration) does not have to result in a stark choice: success in a single specialty *or* true excellence in none—although the choice is often presented as such, particularly to young scholars and artists. (And given such a choice, what ambitious, gifted young artist, embarking on her graduate education, would choose the latter?)

But the fact is that many young artists at the Ohio State University do make an effort to educate themselves and “cross boundaries.” It isn’t easy. Each graduate program—those in visual art, creative writing, music composition, and so on—operates as a self-sufficient unit, and a student must be not only “proactive” but savvy in navigating the bureaucracy (especially when this involves crossing from, for example, the College of the Arts to the College of Humanities, as a sculptor interested in writing and reading poetry would be obliged to do). Indeed, it’s quite common for a student in the School of Music, for example, to reach the end of his education without ever so much as *meeting* a student or faculty member in creative writing, photography, or printmaking.

The evidence exists, however, that a number of students in our graduate programs do manage to cross over. Acting on instinct and determination, every year there are students who patch together a version of their own interdisciplinary “minors” in the arts—painters taking graduate poetry workshops, composers taking dance classes, writers studying acting. And in spring 2005, when a graduate seminar in “The Making of Art”^{*} was taught through Comparative Studies, the demand for the course far exceeded the instructor’s ability to accommodate it. In the end, 21 students registered for what had been planned as a 12-student seminar; over 40 other students across all arts disciplines inquired about the course, and 15 of these asked to be put on a waiting list.

A programmatic approach to interdisciplinarity among artists pursuing their graduate degrees at the Ohio State University—the proposed Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization in Fine Arts (GISFA)—would serve to formalize and institutionalize what

* A proposal to offer this seminar annually—not through Comparative Studies but through the College of the Arts and Sciences—is currently under consideration by Arts and Sciences; see below.

such students are already doing on their own, offering a considerably better-rounded and pedagogically founded sequence of courses, even as the program could be tailored to fit any single student's particular needs. It would give students a template (rather than leaving them at the mercy of the University course bulletin) for what would essentially constitute a "minor" in Fine Arts that cuts across all arts disciplines, to be earned concurrently with the Masters degree in Fine Arts (or the equivalent degree in a field such as Music) in the student's own discipline. It would be in our students' interests not only to smooth the bureaucratic path toward such an education for those who are inclined to pursue it, but to provide the advising oversight that GISFA offers and to confer upon these students the distinction of a formally recognized graduate "minor."

Perhaps needless to say, the purpose of such a program would not be to encourage "dabbling," or to dilute the experience of the student artist's graduate education in his or her discipline, but to provide an opportunity that is unlikely to be matched in any artist's postgraduate years.

IN THE WORLD of the artist, and particularly in university settings, specialization and its unwelcome companion, isolation, are commonplace. In the pursuit of excellence in novel-writing, choreography, lithography, sculpture, music composition, and so on, the "bigger questions" about the creation of art, what art means to address and how, the role of the artist in society, and the process of art-making that go beyond technique and form, tend to be left out of the picture. But if an artist rarely (or never!) has a conversation, or shares work with, artists working in different disciplines, much of the potential of an individual artist may go unrealized; thinking can become stale, or circular. Many questions about the work itself will remain unasked.

Even more than this—or as a direct result of this—the loss to society is incalculable.

Today it is considered unremarkable that much of the art produced in any discipline tends to be accessible (and of interest) only to other artists in that field. That most poetry today is read only by poets, new music is listened to only by those who themselves compose or play it, visual art is paid attention to only by other visual artists (but further: painters pay attention to the work only of other painters, glassblowers to the work of glassblowers!)—that unless a dance concert is an old favorite, "The

Nutcracker” hauled out yet again, the audience for it is in the main *dancers* (and dance critics!)—is sometimes lamented but otherwise unaddressed.

The Ohio State University has an opportunity, through an interdisciplinary specialization in art-making that could be pursued by our students *while* they hone their own crafts and professionalize themselves in their major fields, to do something ground-breaking, and of potential great importance beyond the university itself.

THERE IS nothing ground-breaking in the notion that a particular art practice is enriched by an understanding of other arts. Indeed, there was a time when it was unsurprising to find novelists who also painted, poets who composed music—and certainly it was unsurprising to find, in the “salons” of Europe, painters and composers and novelists talking to one another about their work, arguing about it, criticizing it, and influencing one another, as well as collaborating on new work. Given that “interdisciplinary” has become a buzzword for artists as well as scholars in the twenty-first century, it is particularly astonishing that such truly multidisciplinary communities are rare, out in the “real world” outside the Academy as well as within the borders of our universities.

One of the few exceptions to the rule of artistic isolation within a specialty occurs regularly at artists’ colonies such as the venerable Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. At the American Academy in Rome, and at Bellagio on Lake Como, the idea of community and influence across boundaries is even farther explored, when artists of all stripes work alongside scholars and critics across a wide range of disciplines. Within universities, there are a few programs that encourage or concentrate on interdisciplinarity among artists, but there is no program as encompassing as the one proposed herein, *or* that does not dilute the primary experience in a student’s chosen field. The Inter-Arts Center at San Francisco State University offers a graduate degree (an M.A. in Creative Arts with a concentration in Interdisciplinary Arts) that includes classes in visual art, music, dance, design, theater (as well as radio, TV, and cinema) but excludes creative writing in any genre and doesn’t include a concentration in any single area; the California Institute of the Arts offers an Integrated Media Program (a graduate program for interdisciplinary work in art and technology, which does not include any fields outside the visual arts); the Maine College of Art offers an interdisciplinary M.F.A., but its interdisciplinarity is limited to those within the visual arts (Maine has no faculty in other art fields). Goddard

College in Vermont offers a truly interdisciplinary M.F.A.—but, like the program at SFSU, at the expense of expertise in any single field (indeed, Goddard’s program does not recognize individual arts as disciplines in and of themselves, but espouses the principle of breaking down all distinctions between arts).

The GISFA program would not interfere with each student’s graduate education in his field of specialization—the program to which he applied (and in all cases, these programs at the Ohio State University are highly competitive)—but would allow any graduate student in any art field to choose to simultaneously undertake an interdisciplinary art education, which would be complementary to the program in which he is enrolled. Any graduate student in any of the arts could elect to participate in this program, which would be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of student needs—from those who are extremely theoretical in their approach to those who are more “hands-on” and intuitive, and from those who already are practicing other arts (e.g., an M.F.A. student in creative writing who composes music and already has a significant background in music—perhaps an undergraduate degree or a music performance career in her background; a painter who also writes poetry and has a background in theater, long-unused; a composer who is interested in writing operas and has a background in creative writing; a choreographer who is beginning to introduce verbal narrative to his dances, and wants more formal training in the discipline) to those who believe that an understanding of the practice and process of other arts will enrich their own work in a subtler, less direct way (a glass sculptor who simply wants to learn more about music, theater, writing and/or movement, or a writer who wants to explore characterization through acting classes and/or portrait photography). Beyond the core course, a seminar through the College of Arts and Sciences, students will be able to explore the practice of arts outside their own discipline or a combination of arts practice and criticism, arts practice and the psychology of creativity and the philosophy of aesthetics, or folklore as it relates to the practice of art (and so on); the possibilities—and combinations—given the resources we have at our disposal at OSU, are nearly endless.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL of the GISFA program is to allow—and indeed encourage—the artists who choose to pursue their graduate education at the Ohio State University, and who are accomplished enough to gain admission to one of our competitive arts programs, the opportunity to enlarge the scope of their vision and

complicate the art they produce, and to enrich and deepen their education in art beyond a single area of specialty. Students who choose this option will be uniquely equipped to create art that embraces a wider field of vision, and that “speaks” to a wider audience. Graduate school is usually thought of as a time for narrowing of focus, for jettisoning other interests and pursuits, but an artist who has begun early in his or her career to think, and create, outside the confines of a specialization, is in a far better position to make art that communicates, and serves, the culture and society of our time—and of times to come. Indeed, true success in artistic creation and performance requires breadth, and depth, in matters that go beyond the demands of any individual arts discipline

TARGETED STUDENTS

THE GISFA PROGRAM will target graduate students in creative writing, music composition and performance, dance (choreography and performance), theater, all fields of visual art, and be available to graduate students in certain other fields (for example, in architecture, design, and art education). Initial queries of students in graduate programs in the arts suggest that in the first year perhaps 10-15 students will enroll in the specialization, and as many as 40 will participate in it once it is fully developed and publicized. (This number is a purely speculative; at the moment, interest in such a program is highest in dance and creative writing, in which large numbers of current students have expressed interest in the possibility of such a program. In creative writing, two-thirds of the graduate students asked said yes, they would “definitely be interested,” but it remains to be seen whether they would actually enroll in such high numbers; students in the visual arts are close behind those in writing and dance. In music, on the other hand, only one or two current students would be likely to participate.)

If the numbers of participating students turns out to be so large that a single section of the core course yearly cannot accommodate them, it would be relatively simple to add a second section of that course, particularly once the program is up and running, and faculty outside the initial group participating have had a chance to visit and observe the class. The courses on the “options” list are so varied, and the list so extensive, that there should be no difficulty accommodating student need there, no matter how much the GISFA program grows.

REQUIREMENTS

THE GISFA PROGRAM will require that students complete a minimum of 17 credit hours over four courses to satisfy the requirements of the specialization.

- **REQUIRED COURSE – All students must take the core course, a five-hour multidisciplinary seminar for artists in all fields, which will be offered through the College of Arts and Sciences**

(This course, as noted above, is under development. The written proposal for the course as offered through ASC is with the curriculum committee now [Autumn 2005], but an initial [oral] presentation was made to the ASC curriculum committee last spring and met with its approval, as confirmed by Donald Sylvan, the Chair of that committee in 2004-2005. A version of the course, taught through Comparative Studies under the title “The Making of Art: A Multidisciplinary Seminar for Artists,” has been taught as CS 792 and as CS 850 [a Wexner Seminar], a 5-hour course, by Michelle Herman, of the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing, Department of English.)

In the core course, to be offered by the College of Arts and Sciences once a year, and taught each year by a different faculty member from one of the arts faculties (see below)*, a group of graduate students from across various art fields will meet weekly and consider the ongoing and finished work of the members of the class, approaching this work not from the single perspective (and the concomitant emphasis on technique, and the conventions and jargon) of a single field, but from the wider perspective of art (process, practice, and theory) overall. The reading list and other aspects of the organization of the course would likely vary depending on the individual faculty member’s approach, but the general outline of the course would remain constant. Manuscripts and CDs of

* This list of interested and available faculty was compiled in early Autumn 2005 and was submitted with the full course proposal to the College of the Arts and Sciences, but it is by no means complete. The basic goal was a rotation that would require each faculty member to teach the course *no more than* once in six years; given faculty leaves and course reductions, last-minute rearrangements, and grants and fellowships that may unexpectedly free artist/teachers from teaching commitments, it would be ideal to assemble the largest possible number of available faculty, and—again, ideally—to include faculty from all departments involved.

student work would be distributed, studio visits made, slide shows viewed (et cetera). Sample topics for discussion would include but are certainly not limited to the following: the pursuit of meaning in a work of art; notions of truth and verisimilitude; social content; the meaning and nature of “beauty” in art; autobiography and “confession”; the projection of an artist’s personality; the role of performance (in the composition of a work of art as well as its execution—and the inherent differences in, for example, such fields as music and dance, which most often rely on artists other than the composer for its performance, and literature and painting, which are not “performed” in the usual sense of the word at all and are composed in solitude); inspiration; communication; symbolism; and questions of when a work of art is “done” (how does the artist know? what does “done” mean in the case of an abstract painting or sculpture, a lyric poem, a dance piece?).

For some students, this course would be a natural capstone to their graduate education; for others, it would serve as a doorway to the other courses that would constitute the minor (and almost certainly there would be students taking this course who would not elect to undertake the full-fledged minor).

Faculty (preliminary list) for core course:

Michelle Herman, Creative Writing (English)
Lee K. Abbott, Creative Writing (English)
Joy Reilly, Theater
Lesley Ferris, Theater
Edward Adelson, Music
Candace Feck, Dance
Norah Zuniga Shaw, Dance

- **ELECTIVE COURSES – At least three courses can be chosen from the following list, all of which must be outside the student’s home discipline**

This is a preliminary list, in that it includes most of the courses that *could* potentially appear on the list of options for the program. In the final version, this long list (two long lists, actually—Parts A and B) will be narrowed down [after discussion with faculty who normally teach these courses and an examination of syllabi*]. **It should be noted that nearly all of these courses require permission of the instructor.)**

* Such discussion has already occurred in English and Dance; those courses have all been vetted by the departments offering them.