The Making of Sci-Art
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Abstract
Sci-Art was an idea whose time had come; it helped to kickstart a new way of discovery that has had a lasting impact on scientific method and art practice. The fortuitous set of circumstances that secured the Wellcome Trust’s long-term sponsorship of the idea (1997-2006) is related here by Terry Trickett. In responding to a leading question from New York’s Cynthia Pannucci, he describes the early years of sci-art, when artists succeeded in penetrating the realm of science and scientists discovered a new creative impetus through art.

Terry, was it you who invented the word Sci-Art, planted the seed and gave initial guidance for such a program at the Wellcome Trust, London?

This was the question posed in 2018 by Cynthia Pannucci, founder of ASCI (Art & Science Collaborations, Inc.), New York, which prompted a response from me that led to a lengthy exchange of views between the two of us focusing on the U.K.’s Sci-Art initiative. I started by explaining the name. In 1996, the Call for Ideas that I’d written for the first Sci-Art competition was being vetted by the Wellcome Trust’s legal department and others. Wellcome’s research scientists took exception to the title I’d given the initiative—Facts and Fancy—after Nabokov’s poetic words included in his “Butterflies”; “There’s no science without fancy and no art without fact” [1]. Ken Arnold (Wellcome’s exhibitions officer) and I decided we had to find a new title—a problem I shared with my wife Lynn, who unhesitatingly suggested “Sci-Art.”

Sci-Art was an idea whose time had come; it was no coincidence that ASCI and other initiatives with similar aims all started within a few years of one another toward the end of the last century. Sci-Art did help to kickstart a new way of discovery (as did ASCI) that has had a lasting impact; in retrospect I can see that Sci-Art has moved on from being merely an idea to a point where it has gathered an unstoppable momentum for change affecting both scientific work and art practice. How did this happen?

Back in the 1990s, my design company, Trickett Associates, was responsible for moving a range of Wellcome departments into new premises at 210 Euston Road, London. It was a procedure that enabled me to forge a close working relationship with Laurence Smaje, the scientist/director in charge, and to put to him, once the job was complete, my harebrained suggestion for Wellcome’s millennium project—totally unfined but vaguely on the theme of Science joining with Art in one way or another. He was very receptive. His way forward was to have a word with the chairman. It worked; the chairman, Sir Roger Gibbs (whom I had met previously) said: “we won’t do it as our millennium project; we’ll do it anyway.” The point here is that many things conspired together to make Sci-Art a possibility—my very good working relationship with Wellcome, Laurence’s immediate positive response and the informal procedures by which the project got the green light.

Laurence and I set up an informal committee to hammer out the idea; he nominated three science people, and I nominated three arts people. After much deliberation, an artist member of the committee put forward the key concept of a competition aimed at encouraging partnerships between scientists and artists to submit ideas for potential funding by Wellcome. It seems obvious now, but then, it appeared to offer a completely new way forward, although it took the impact of another event, taking place at much the same time, to finally remove any lingering doubts in the minds of Wellcome’s decision-makers.

As part of Trickett Associates’ work at 210 Euston Road, we had expanded the ground floor reception area to include street-level exhibition space. Its inaugural exhibition presented the scientific research of Matthew Holley, Royal Society University Research Fellow, Department of Physiology, University of Bristol, and his artist colleagues, who had created artworks inspired by Matthew’s marvelous images of the inner ear. Trickett Associates, working with the exhibition’s curator, Ken Arnold, juxtaposed these artworks against electron microscopic images of the ear to demonstrate “seeing the way we hear”—an approach that also explained the show’s title, Look Hear (Fig. 1). The result was an outstanding success; it captured the interest of both the scientific and arts communities as well as gaining an extra audience from passersby. For Wellcome, it substantiated the idea that the introduction of art could assist in the public’s understanding of science.

In the supplemental file to this article, I describe what happened after the first Call for Ideas was distributed, in late 1996. Suffice it to say here that, as a committee, we found what we were looking for—partnerships where artists gave indications that they could penetrate the realms of science, and scientists who showed signs that they could discover some new creative impetus through art. I was fortunate, as chairman of the committee in the first two years of Sci-Art, to be in a position where I could witness, at first hand, the unfolding of a new form of creativity where the arts joined the sciences in what George Steiner later described as a “new code of the collective.” The results provided an answer to his question:

In the scientific project in general . . . and in its application via technology, secularization and sociability are at once inherent and progressive . . . Science can advance at ease with these prognostications. Can the arts and humanities? [2]

By bringing together two minds acting as one in a spirit of sociability, the Sci-Art experiment acted as a collective touch paper in releasing an explosion of extraordinary ideas. For many involved the results were life changing and life enhancing, not least for me, which explains why, late in the day and before memories of Sci-Art’s inception fade forever, I feel bound to put the record straight on how it all started.

References

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