Science and art collaborations are not new and may, in fact, be almost as old as art itself. However, the establishment of practices in which both scientists and artists work together on an equal footing to cocreate works that have value to both science and art is a more recent phenomenon. The integration of SciArt into academic education globally is a clear indication of its establishment as a discipline in its own right. While the debate around artistic research in this context continues, there is also an increasingly necessary discourse surrounding the value of collaborative research at the art-science interface. Public and charitable funding for projects in this area has clearly fueled this growth. Some of this impetus has served to provide a shop window to sell complex and distant scientific ideas to a skeptical and disengaged public. However, this could be considered to contribute to instrumentalizing art practice to illustrate scientific discovery. Despite the negatives that exist in both directions, at its best, work in this area can act as an important meeting point for a dialogue between science, art and the public. The global COVID-19 pandemic has changed the relationship between society and science—arguably the public is now more engaged in scientific advice and opinion. Perhaps that change makes it all the more important to establish spaces to continue that tripartite dialogue.

While art and science collaborative research appears to flourish, what has received only limited attention and analysis is a detailed understanding of how such dialogues arise and how collaborative relationships are actually formed, nurtured and maintained. Collaboration is not always congenial, nor are successful outcomes guaranteed. Instead the value is sometimes found elsewhere—perhaps in incitement and failure. It is in the details of these interactions and dialogues that the real discourse of the science and art interface is often found.

The call for this special section sought to highlight projects in which the technological aspects of interdisciplinarity did not dominate the conversation but in which the relationship between disciplines, and the people who operate within and across them, is at the heart of the conversation. The intention was for the focus to be on the process rather than the final output and not to be restricted to cases where the process or output were necessary successful—we can, after all, often learn more from failure than success. Most importantly this section seeks to question and explore the relationship between practitioners and to provide a roadmap for such relationships into the future. It was clear that encouraging a response that was less focused on research outcomes but was instead more focused on the dialogue and the journey toward, or even around, those outcomes posed some challenges for authors and reviewers alike. Shifting attention toward a detailed analysis of the process of collaboration requires us all to rethink how discussion and process reveal the true potential of interdisciplinarity, and its emergent value is not always where we might expect it to be.

An inclination toward an outcome-driven focus in the discussion of collaborations between artists and scientists tends to result in a particular route through research and may suppress the development of new approaches that are born out of a curious interest in other disciplines. Collaboration does not always happen naturally; it needs to be activated, and roles need to be properly recognized in a space that is motivated by blurring boundaries and transforming awareness through interaction.

Our own exploration of this space, and editing the submissions under this call, have led us to conclude that there is a need for a level of vulnerability and a willingness to embrace the mutability of research outside of one's own territory if collaboration is to be a truly rewarding alliance. What constitutes a rewarding alliance remains the most ephemeral of concepts. We have chosen not to use the term "successful alliance" to reflect our belief that the reward comes from the process of being engaged in a shared journey of discovery rather than the more-shallow assessment of the success of the outcome.

Catherine Baker
Birmingham Institute of Creative Arts
Birmingham City University, U.K.

Iain D. Gilchrist
School of Psychological Science
University of Bristol, U.K.

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