



About Us
Community
Research Tools
Education
Web Consulting
News & Events
Opportunities
Forums

[Home](#) - [News & Events](#) - [Public Science Events](#)

## News & Events

### SciArt: collaboration or con?

#### 'Talking Genes' Debate, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 11th July 2005

Since 1997 the Wellcome Trust has awarded funds totalling several hundred thousand pounds to collaborative projects between scientists and artists. But is this money well spent? Is so called SciArt just an attempt by science to gain kudos? Or is there a real benefit from bringing together people with such different perspectives and processes? Panellists and audience members at the [Institute of Contemporary Arts](#) 'Talking Genes' debate on Monday gave their, quite different, answers.

**Lewis Wolpert** (Emeritus Professor of Biology as Applied to Medicine, [UCL](#)), kicked off the debate and immediately left no one in any doubt as to his opinion: "absolutely pointless", he claimed. He sees no benefit whatsoever, from the coming together of these two fundamentally different groups. Science and art are completely distinct, he argued. Science is nonpersonal, constantly adding, little by little to a common body of knowledge. If Watson and Crick, for example, had not discovered the structure of DNA then someone else would have done so very shortly afterwards. Art, on the other hand, is totally subjective and based firmly in the personality of the artist. He was particularly at pains to see the benefit to scientists, suggesting that such collaborations were a result of "social snobbery", and the need for scientists to feel better about themselves.

**Sian Ede**, (Arts Director, [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation](#)) author of 'Art and Science' suggested, in contrast, that collaborations between artists and scientists are both beneficial and inevitable. Artists have always been inspired by science and technology, both by the results of science, and the process of the endeavour itself. She asked "are artists just supposed to stick pillows over their heads and ignore science?" In terms of benefits to scientists, Sian cited the [successful collaboration](#) between dancer/choreographer Wayne McGregor and neuropsychologist, Dr Rosaleen McCarthy from the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Cambridge. Their partnership, funded by Arts and Humanities Research Board and Arts Council England, is aimed at understanding the brain processes involved in dance and choreography comprehension. Exposure to someone as physically adept and spatially aware as McGregor is clearly invaluable to the research.

**Ken Arnold**, (Head of Public Programmes, [Wellcome Trust](#)) responsible for funding many Science/Art collaborations, pointed out that, in addition to such tangible scientific benefits, a certain "philosophical richness" can also be gained from these collaborations (at this point Lewis Wolpert rolled his eyes in dismay). It allows, in essence, the scientist to take a step back from their research and assess it from a completely different perspective. He added, that perhaps one of the biggest benefits to the scientists involved is the opportunity to engage the public in ways that pure science could not. Opening up science to new audiences.

One of the first and most famous Science/Art collaborations was that of developmental biologist Kate Storey and fashion-designer sister, Helen. Together they created a couture collection inspired by the first 1000 hours of embryo development. The exhibition, named '[Primitive Streak](#)' after a key stage during embryogenesis, toured world wide and was viewed by many millions of people. A significant proportion of visitors may not have been interested in a science exhibition, Ken suggests, but might have come along and been inspired to learn more. Lewis, however, remained unconvinced: "What can anyone learn about embryology from a bunch of dresses?!". Perhaps the unshakeable Lewis could himself exchange pipette for paintbrush once in a while and benefit from some of that philosophical richness?

*Dr Ruth Williams -- Lymphocyte Development, CSC MRC, London*



Print Friendly