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# For a Transversal Art-Science

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‘Art-Science’ has gained increased visibility within academic debate as well as wider public discourse in the last decade. This burgeoning and international field of collaboration has been embraced by artists and scientists alike as a crucial arena through which to challenge the institutional and epistemic divisions between disciplines, as well as to generate new concepts and practices for creatively reimagining and responding to broader social, political, and environmental problems. In this sense, contemporary art-science can be productively considered as part of a much longer historical tradition that highlights the insufficiencies of essentialist definitions of ‘Art’ and ‘Science’, to instead foreground a richer history of cross-fertilisation and encounter between the fields (Snow, 1959; Cohen, 2001). Today, ‘art-science’ has become something of an umbrella term for a multiplicity of collaborative practices at the interface of the arts, sciences, and new technologies – including, for example, bioart, nanoart, and forms of new media art.

Despite this heterogeneity, our discussions and imaginaries for what these collaborations *could become* has been limited by quite narrow understandings of their organisational and spatial form (typically it is the artist visiting the scientist), what their aims and outcomes should be (often PR for corporate science), and their broader logics of interdisciplinary engagement. The rationale and justifications provided by institutions and funding bodies supporting art-science collaborations has often been framed by one of two main interdisciplinary logics: a *logic of innovation* in which art-science practices are justified in terms of their capacity to develop new commercial products and prototypes that can help fuel the ‘creative economy’; and a *logic of*

*accountability* in which art becomes a tool of ‘public engagement’ to help science construct its publics (Born and Barry, 2010). Common to both these logics is a thought of ‘interdisciplinarity’ in which ‘Art’ and ‘Science’ would continue to operate in accordance with their already-established terms of reference and disciplinary methodologies, meeting only on the terrain of outputs and deliverables in ways that do very little to change existing habits of thinking and doing.

But what if we imagined things differently? What if we took the hyphen (-) rather than the terms (‘Art’, ‘Science’) seriously, conceiving ‘art-science’ collaborations less in terms of the communication of already-constituted terms and products towards pre-envisioned ends, and more as a mutually transformative *encounter* of creative and emergent processes. Speaking back in the 1990s, the French philosopher Félix Guattari already warned us of the dangers of an emerging hegemonic ‘myth of interdisciplinarity’, but also signalled the creative possibility for something different to emerge:

“There is a fashion, inherited from the counterculture of the 1960s, for the facile intercommunication of different disciplines. It is the myth of interdisciplinarity. Scientists will give a hand to artists, who will give a hand to philosophers, to politicians, to God knows who... And everything is going to be better. But it just doesn’t work like that! The languages differ, their objects are singular...there are strange relationships established... of course transversalities are possible, but they are not within reach. They can be found, perhaps, precisely in a specific relationship, a singularisation of each of the disciplines” (Guattari, 2011: 43).

Against what he saw as the “facile intercommunication of different disciplines”, then, Guattari introduces the concept of *transversality* to explore the possibilities for a different - non-

hierarchical and non-representational – thinking of interdisciplinarity that is alive to the potentials for novelty and transformation. A few key features of this transversal mode of thinking, and how they might speak to the ‘Scientist in Residence’ program, can be briefly outlined here. First, transversality seeks to interrupt the hierarchical division of labour in Art-Science collaborations that conceives Art (and the artist) as secondary to Science, with the artist simply reflecting on or communicating the truth claims of Science. Indeed, in visiting the scientific laboratory it is usually the artist who is positioned as ‘learning’ the techniques and protocols of their scientific ‘mentors’ which they then seek to creatively re-present in their work (it isn’t usually clear how the practices of the scientists have been affected or transformed by these collaborations). What makes the ‘Scientist in Residence’ program (initiated here by Gluon in collaboration with Ars Electronica, the Serpentine Gallery, BOZAR, and several other research and university institutions) so different and interesting is its attempt to reverse the usual procedures and spatialities of art-science collaboration by inviting scientists to leave the comfort of the laboratory to undertake collaborative research activity in the art studio. The residencies will thus explore new potential forms of art-science relation, and their capacity to generate alternate ideas, methodologies, and approaches to interdisciplinary research. They will seek to enact more transversal relations of Art and Science, which in contrast to more hierarchical logics of organisation develop “*a-centric* constellations which do not move on the basis of predetermined strands of channels”, but which instead produce new modes of relation between fields that might reinvent them as something else (Raunig, 2007: 205). In this sense, simply having scientists visit the artist’s studio is insufficient if it is not also accompanied by a commitment to thinking and producing novel relations and practices that resist easy identification or categorisation.

Second, a transversal art-science critiques a representational image of thought that narrowly figures art as a *tool of communication*. Here, the potentials of art-science become reduced to the possibility of establishing ‘dialogue’ between clearly defined fields of thought and practice. However, Guattari frequently emphasised that art has nothing to do with the passive or useful exchange of information that comprises our contemporary knowledge-economies. It instead has the character of an *event* that ruptures with dominant significations circulating in the social field and plunges thought outside of ‘common sense’. It is this thought of art as a ‘difference machine’ that can induce “unimagined mutations in ways of seeing, feeling, and being affected” that is often missing in conventional art-science discourse, but which this ‘Scientist in Residence’ might creatively explore (Guattari, 2011: 41). What transversality offers, then, is a way of thinking the transformative potential of art-science based not on modes of communication that merely serve to re-affirm pre-existing boundaries and dialogues, but rather in terms of a transformative *encounter* that suspends dominant relations of thought, practice, and subjectivity.

Finally, art-science initiatives like the ‘Scientist in Residence’ program also have the capacity to challenge the dominant *values* that we ascribe to interdisciplinary collaboration. As noted above in relation to the logics of accountability and invention, our usual discussions of art-science tend to be preoccupied with the question of their *use-value*: emphasising already-determined outcomes that can be usefully applied to specific domains or problems. Here the emphasis falls on the utilitarian and anthropocentric question of *what science can do*. The issue with this is that we lose sensitivity to what might be termed the *event-value* of art-science encounters: its capacity to establish new relations that intensify (rather than simplify) differences and give rise to novel possibilities of life that cross scientific, artistic, philosophical, and political spheres (Massumi, 2011). Importantly, these novel potentials and relations are not

tioned to the disciplinary boundaries, subjectivities, and institutional norms of the present, but rather call forth future modes of thinking and acting yet-to-come.

A transversal art-science is thus an invitation to inhabit the interstices of interdisciplinary collaboration differently. It valorises those singular practices and encounters today, like this Scientist in Residence program, that open potentials to exceed the ready-made channellings of collaborative thought and practice in ways that activate other potentials of life. The transversal force of the art-science encounter thus has the potential to introduce unexpected transformations in the disciplinary habits of the present, inviting artists and scientists (and everyone in-between) to cross existential thresholds and enter new experiential universes of possibility.

## References

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