**Exhibiting Art Created at the Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology:**

**The Case for Academic Museums and Galleries**

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At the 2013 meeting of the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG), several curators and directors shared two new interlocking challenges that they face:

* pressures to justify their existence to a parent organization that is operating in a highly competitive marketplace, combined with
* an accelerating emphasis by parent organizations on collaboration across curricula.

Today, there are at least 700 campus art museums and galleries in the United States. In recent years, private funders—including The Kress Foundation and The Mellon Foundation—have made sustained efforts to stabilize those institutions. They accomplish this, in part, by supporting interdisciplinary programs that engage faculty and students outside of art and art history departments.  Those programs are generally considered to have been quite successful, and lessons regarding interdisciplinary collaboration have been disseminated through the relevant professional networks.

However, a recent study conducted by The Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago notes that, “Still, a current challenge of campus museums is to increase their pedagogic relevance to a broader array of academic disciplines.”[[1]](#footnote-0) For many academic art museums and galleries, meeting this challenge is especially difficult in the areas of science and technology.

At the AAMG meeting, a colleague noted with alarm that her museum’s parent university has changed its emphasis from educating students in the liberal arts to educating them in engineering and science.  As the leader of an already marginalized campus art museum, she saw this move by the parent institution as an existential threat.

Yet, exhibitions that make explicit connections between work by contemporary artists and science and technology could provide her—and many other “museum people” in the academic community—with opportunities to develop new collaborations with faculty, students, community partners, and others not normally served by campus art museums and galleries.

The push toward interdisciplinary collaboration in higher education has risen from many motives, but its intended results are, perhaps surprisingly, related to purposes ascribed to large, urban, general—or “encyclopedic”—museums. In a 2012 discussion with the cultural critic András Szántó, Metropolitan Museum Director and CEO Thomas P. Campbell noted that visiting encyclopedic museums gives us a broader perspective on global cultures, “and that helps us to make better decisions about who we are and where we’re going.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

How much broader and richer might that perspective be—and how much better might those decisions be—if students whose core interests lie in the sciences and technical subjects might be persuaded to walk through the gallery door and experience exhibitions that begin to meet them where they are? And, likewise, if art-savvy students felt a deeper connection with the work of their scientific colleagues?

This is emphatically not an argument to simplify art exhibitions to attract new interest. It is, rather, an argument in favor of bringing work of a specific type, and of the very highest quality, to academic galleries.

Nor is it a new argument. Artists have been explicitly making connections with science and technology for so long that many artists currently working at the forefront of contemporary art—Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Trevor Paglen, and Shimpei Takeda among them—no longer emphasize this aspect of their practice. For them, making work that embraces science and technology is naturally and simply what they do. This kind of work is gaining increased acceptance in museums and commercial settings, and it is likely to be known to art students and their professors.

The nation’s emphasis on science, technology, and engineering education is unlikely to flag at any time in the near future—and neither is the competitive pressure facing institutions of higher learning. If for no other reason than survival, —and there are plenty of other, strong, reasons—academic museums and galleries should recognize an opportunity to contribute to this shift in pedagogy. In doing so, they can bring to a new cadre of students the broadening, deepening experiences that art alone can provide. And, perhaps, they can contribute to helping students “make better decisions about where we’re going.”

About the author

From 2005 to 2013, Laura Knott served on the curatorial and exhibition staff at the MIT Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She developed and managed dozens of exhibitions, including a new project that examines recent work in the century-old field of kinetic sculpture. Laura holds degrees from Duke University and MIT, and is the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, state arts agencies, and The Shifting Foundation. While a student at MIT, Laura studied environmental art and performance with Otto Piene, co-founder of the postwar Group Zero, and video history and production with Ricky Leacock, co-founder of “direct cinema.”

An editor and author in the field of contemporary art and culture, Laura has had an active art career as well. Her work has been presented at the *documenta* exhibition in Kassel, Germany; on public television; and in venues ranging from the California desert to the Internet.

As a member of the Visiting Faculty at Tufts University, Laura taught the chronically oversubscribed course, “Money and Ethics in the Contemporary Art World.” She is the lead curator and director of the consulting and exhibitions firm Cultureburg, whose mission is “to connect smart people and great art” by focusing on work created at the intersections of art, science, and technology. Laura is currently working on a book entitled, *Welcome to Cultureburg*.

1. *Campus Art Museums in the 21st Century: A Conversation*, October 2012, <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/campusartmuseums/>, accessed May 20, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. <https://www.artbasel.com/-/media/ArtBasel/Documents/Transcripts/Transcripts_2012/transcript_museum.pdf>, accessed July 18, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)