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FEBRUARY 9, 2016

“Hate the Raindrop” and Other Reflections on DASER



By Abree Murch

Have you ever stepped into a space where you felt like you were in two different centuries at the same time?

Granted, when this happened to me recently, I knew exactly where (and when) I was. It was a typical 21st-century Thursday night in downtown DC. To avoid the rush-hour chaos underground, I had elected to walk the mile-and-change from Farragut North station in some

rather unsuitable boots and my ankle was protesting enthusiastically. But looking around at the gilded Great Hall and wood-paneled meeting room of the National Academy of Sciences, I wondered which great minds had once sat in the very same place I was now sitting. I felt like I had fallen back in time, even though I was there for a decidedly modern purpose.

D.C. Art and Science Evening Rendezvous (DASER) is a monthly gathering sponsored by Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences (CNPNAS). It's a hard event to describe, a modern salon (as in the intellectual social gatherings of the 16th and 17th centuries) that brings together people from both the arts and the sciences to network and, more importantly, share ideas. The theme of this month's discussion was "Ideation, Translation, and Realization," and believe me, there was so much ideation going on in my own head during the panelists' presentations that I was happy to just stare out the window at absolutely nothing on the hour-long Metro ride home. Once all my thoughts finally settled, I was left with four takeaways that have reshaped the way I think about the relationship between art and science:

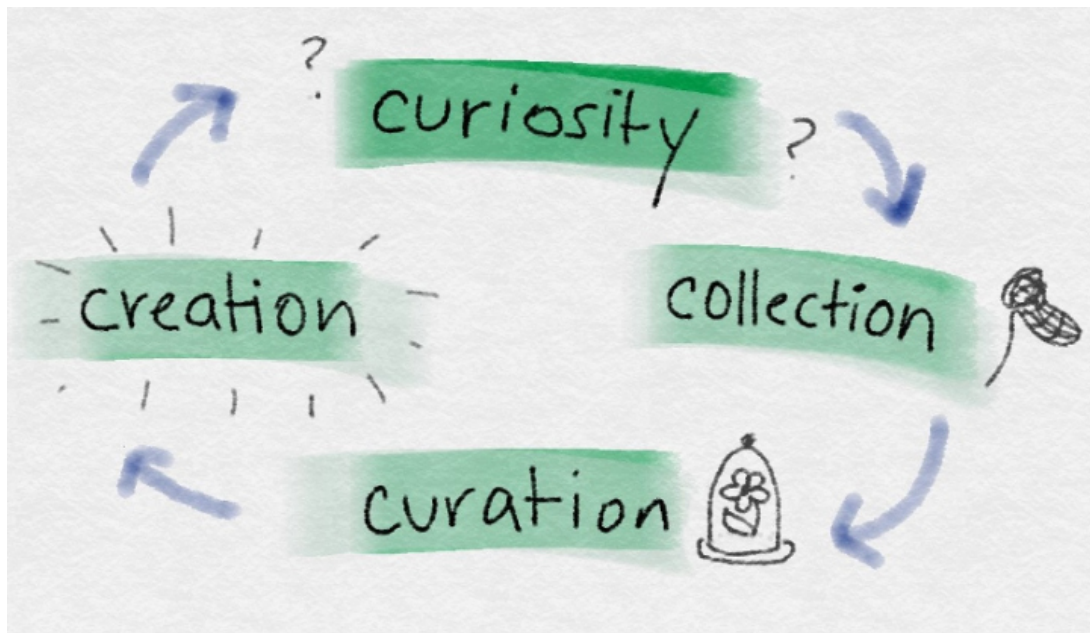
TAKEAWAY #1 – Interdisciplinary cooperation is going to be a huge part of the answer to humanity's problems.

David Edwards, self-described Professor of Ideal Translation (best job title ever) at Harvard University, drove this point home at the outset of the evening. He pointed out that the "scientific" problems humanity is facing today are incredibly complex in their nature because they involve humanity – and the nature of humanity itself is complex. As someone who nearly became a grad student working under an Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences professor in an Environmental Science and Policy department doing paleoecological research, this was an argument near and dear to my heart; as Professor Edwards pointed out, we can expect complicated problems to have complicated solutions and it would be a big mistake to stick solely

to the traditional tenants of the scientific method and ignore what potential solutions the arts have to offer.

TAKEAWAY #2 – Creativity is not exclusive to art.

In what was my favorite presentation of the evening, Dr. Richard Foster illustrated how the concept of human creativity may be newer than we think; he pointed out that the word “creativity” was only added to the dictionary in 1875, indicating that perhaps previously the realm of creation was one reserved only for gods. He broke creativity down even further to its most basic definition: “the ability to associate two previously unassociated fields.” It makes you wonder why we treat the art and science as mutually exclusive when they both require not only the same bisociation ability, but use the same methodology:



TAKEAWAY #3: Hate the raindrop, embrace the snowflake.

I'll be honest – I cracked up (as did half the room) when architect and professor Philip Beesley raised the idea of hating raindrops because they exemplify the “architecture of death,” but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. While minimalism and isolation have their place, Nature does not operate in a purely minimalistic way. Think of the intricacy of a snowflake – even though it doesn't use space as efficiently as a raindrop, we still think it's beautiful. In that same way, we shouldn't keep trying to isolate ourselves in artificial physical and intellectual bubbles, but, as Professor Beesley poetically put it, keep an open mind and think of ourselves as “enmeshed in a living, breathing whole”.

Philip Beesley is also the director of the Toronto-based Living Architecture Systems Group that designed the (free) Sentient Chamber exhibit on display at the NAS until May 31st.

TAKEAWAY #4 – Communication is one of the biggest barriers to interdisciplinary cooperation.

After the presentations, Heather Spence (a musician and marine biologist who does awesome interdisciplinary work in her own right) asked the panel of presenters what they thought the best way would be to foster interdisciplinary exploration in schools and at work. Artist and panelist Patricia Olynyk pointed out that science often “invites” in art “to make it more creative”, but art hardly ever invites in science, and that one of the things she hopes to see in the future is the creation of more two-way paths between the disciplines. Dr. Foster offered up his opinion that the problem stemmed from a lack of understanding by one side of how the other side thinks. Some people form a hypothesis and then gather data (science), while others gather data first and then form a hypothesis (art); someone who thinks in terms of hypothesis-first may not understand someone who is oriented to the data-first approach.

This discussion and the smaller ones that continued into the reception led me to draw my own conclusion that our natural instinct to categorize things is what's really working against us, especially when it comes to sustainability. Old-school approaches that encourage thinking across the lines that have previously divided the art and science disciplines are key to finding solutions to new-school problems. In the space of three hours, I witnessed more creativity in a single room than you could find in the most expensive gallery or in a campus-worth of labs. Now more than ever, the world needs more events like DASER that shun confining ideologies and take a data-first approach to hypothesis-first issues: physically put thinkers and makers in a space with each other, lay out the problem, and see what happens.

For more information and to register for the next DASER, visit [the CPNAS website](#) or check out the videos of past DASERs on their [YouTube Channel](#).