

UNIVERSITIES, MUSEUMS, AND COMMUNITIES: STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Societies are changing as well as their major institutions such as universities and museums which are impacted by societal transformations, but also vice-versa. Universities and museums have ambitions to impact changes and transformations of society. This changing interaction is dynamic and contingent and requires strong institutions.

Keywords: transition, strategy, university, museum, communities.

1. Three tendencies of universities and museums in society

Three tendencies seem to impact the way knowledge institutes in general, and universities and museums in particular, are looking to the future of connecting science and art for the purpose of resilient communities. The convergent trend between science and art itself impacts universities and museums. The increasingly hybrid models used by scientists and artists are required by the increasing complexity of our societies. The dynamics of increasingly diverse communities, cities, and regions in their use of knowledge, and their interactions with universities and museums, may turn science, art, and culture into leverages for these communities (Bouckaert, 2019).

First, *science and art, and therefore universities and museums, are coming (back) together* in three concurrent movements.

In the second half of the 20th century, specialization in various fields of science significantly extended our levels of knowledge. This had an impact on how universities and scientific communities organized themselves. At the same time, however, it resulted in a process of pillarization, confining particular sciences to isolated disciplinary silos. While this was a familiar mechanism in the organizational sciences, the lack of possibilities, opportunities, and incentives to co-ordinate and collaborate between and even within faculties tended to have negative effects. It is obvious today that every effort is being made to make multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, and trans-disciplinary research happen. This, however, is clearly easier said than done. Nevertheless, increasingly mixed or hybrid labs and research units have been established (medicine/ engineering; medicine/ psychology; law/ economics; engineering/ sociology, etc.). European Union ERC research programs invite us to expand our knowledge not only through specialization but perhaps even more through collaboration. To create new knowledge synergies between disciplinary silos are required. This has resulted in a converging scientific research strategy.

In the community of the arts, research and teaching likewise evolved into silos and specialization. After this period of specialization, however, a similar movement towards convergence has been evolving within the arts, a movement away from the isolated silos of the past. It goes without saying that specialization continues within the various branches of the arts, but borders are blurring. Mixed media, hybrid methods, the use of performance etc. has resulted in a wave of artists and art that combine images, music, words, pictures, video, etc. To expand new art, new artistic research and expressions have developed, creating synergies between different media. This has resulted in a converging artistic research strategy.

A third movement has been combining and aligning these two existing movements, establishing a convergence between science and art, and therefore between universities and museums. Some overlapping territories are more self-evident—such as design and development, which need to combine ergonomics and aesthetics. At the same time, increasingly technical tools (software and hardware) allow us to handle materials in a creative way. There is a need to visualize creatively complex realities such as DNA, or cosmic ‘black holes’ and there are new technologies at our disposal such as scanning, 3D-video,

and 3D-printing. Just as the world of sports has embraced science, the expansion of art into science is also happening, with examples such as knowledge of materials, acoustics for music, rehabilitation, and therapy for curing protocols, etc.

The potential influences of arts on science, and of science on arts, are obvious, given a shared vision on innovation and creativity, the need to define new concepts and spaces, and experimentation. It is from these blurred border lines within the sciences, within the arts, and between science and art and a converging momentum for synergies, that a focus on how to combine contemporary science and contemporary art is happening. This impacts universities and museums.

A second evolution refers to *the 'supply' side* and the identity of the artist and the artistic researcher. Van Winkel, Gielen and Zwaan (2012) conclude that we are moving towards hybrid profiles of artists and artistic researchers. This should alert us to ensure that appropriate training is available that also responds to the needs of the labor market. The 'monolithic' and 'romantic' artist is becoming an exception. Mixed professions are becoming the standard.

A third evolution refers to the *'demand' side* of science, art, and culture, and its role in our socio-economic systems. European societies pay considerable attention to innovation and to creative economies that connect knowledge, art/ culture, and economy. The cultural and creative industries are becoming pivotal in our communities, cities, and regions (UNECC, 2013). Major events (like biennales, cultural capitals, etc.) as well as major museum exhibitions and universities research programs, are now considered significant leverages for cities and regions.

These three tendencies are emerging as an agenda for change with a strategic central question: How should we organize science and arts/ culture, and hence universities and museums, to generate (better) synergies and impacts for our societies? For a university, the question turns into how universities with their brain parks, and museums with their cultural communities should interact to create a synergy between scientific and artistic research (and teaching). This question is even more impacted by the internationalization of science and the arts (for art, see Janssens, 2018).

2. From universities, as scientific institutions engaged in scientific research to universities engaged in scientific and artistic research within communities

Most high-ranking universities have put the synergy between scientific and artistic research high on the agenda. Table 1 provides an overview of the top 50 (2015 Times Higher Education, THE) universities with, or without a museum/ art school. The top 25 consists mostly of American universities with their characteristic cultural and (fiscal) tradition of having campus museums. Martel states that 'within the 4,200 higher education colleges and universities in the US, there are 700 museums, 300 radio stations, 350 rock/ jazz facilities, 120 publishers, 3,500 libraries and 2,300 performing arts centres. So, if you look at the US system (...) art life and academic life are closely linked' (Martel, 2014, p. 7).

Table 1: Times Higher Education Top 50 (2015): universities with/ without an art school/ museum/ 'gallery'

Times Higher Education (THE) 2015 Ranking	Universities without an Art School / Museum / Gallery	Universities with an Art School / Museum / Gallery
1–25	2	23
26–50	10	15

Source: Bouckaert (2016, p. 4)

2.1. Why do major universities invest in art and culture, and in artistic research?

Stanford University has concluded that art and creativity are vital when it comes to tackling major societal problems and challenges. One of the university's associate deans has been quoted as saying that researchers who explore problems from many different angles are likely to be better equipped to grasp and track solutions.

When reference is made to 'museums', however, universities would be better advised to avoid focusing on classical museums. Their focus, rather, should be on a 'gallery', a science gallery, or a science/ art gallery, in which all university functions can be developed in this emerging spirit of interaction between scientific and artistic research (and teaching).

As a result, one can observe that universities are organizations changing from: (1) 'ivory towers' to 'leverages for society'; (2) department 'silos' to disciplinary 'cross fertilization'; (3) 'diverging in depth specialization' to adding 'converging hybridity'. These changes have a significant impact on the functioning of universities. Universities do not only 'discover' and 'invent', but add to this 'discover' and 'invent' also an explicit agenda of 'change and transform' society. This 'transform societies agenda' results in action research. It also results in intensive interactions with societies for evidence-based support. In many cases this results in a multiplier effect for societies and their economies.

2.2. Why do we need to connect universities and museums to society and to our communities?

As a central and general framework for interaction between all three Groups within universities (Biomedical, Science and Technology, and Humanities) the following scheme might apply (Figure 1). The 'initial' situation shows an interaction between 'Society and University', and between 'Society and Museums'. By connecting 'Science and Art', we shift to an interaction between 'Society with Universities & Museums', which affects the relationships between society on the one hand, and universities and museums on the other hand.

Currently, there are interactions between society and the scientific world, and between society and the artistic world. A simple interaction suggests that a society has questions, which then invite answers, or where science and art try to provide answers or replies.

This interaction has become difficult, however, and in some cases even resulted in a mismatch of expectations, perceptions, and strategies leading to misunderstandings and

even distrust between society and universities as expert institutions, and between society and museums as artistic institutions.

However, it has become increasingly clear, nevertheless, that major societal problems need to be solved with scientific support, including e.g. climate change, important economic and financial crises, (political) populist leadership in a state context with responsive citizens, and governance and control of big data clouds and new technologies. All these problems risk to become ultimately unmanageable.

At the highest political level within the UN, seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been agreed upon, with 2030 as the deadline for their realization. In their own way, these 17 SDGs are perhaps utopian in their ambitions and conviction that societies are capable of solving major problems (see also, Achten, Bouckaert and Schokkaert, 2016). Science is and should be focused on developing strategies to help realize these ambitious objectives. On the other hand, there is an evident counter-movement of distrust in experts, and even the promotion of ‘alternative truths’, or a conviction that ideologies should dominate and overrule evidence-based policies.

When science and art become too disconnected from reality, these intellectual institutions become disconnected from emerging problems. They become too technocratic and are increasingly perceived as the ‘ivory towers’ of self-serving and self-protecting elites, which are irrelevant and not accountable for the resources they receive.

It goes without saying that the scientific and artistic communities will develop their own strategies to counter these pressures. To further support this, however, science and art should connect in an effort to create a new agenda with a shared ambition of re-inventing realities and developing possible futures. In the face of societal fatalism, indifference, distrust, and desperate disbelief, this positive strategy for new capacity to trigger new possible futures needs to bring back societal hope, belief, and trust in these futures. This will also demonstrate that science and art together have a shared and mutually reinforcing voluntarist approach to tackling societal problems and create added value (Bouckaert, 2025, forthcoming).

This needs to—or can potentially—happen via the creation of new shared spaces for experiments, which can result in creativity, discovery, and innovation, not only for the immediate resolution of specific problems, but more importantly to generate new visions, paradigms, and trajectories. By organizing a cross-fertilizing context between science and art, and by establishing platforms for serendipity, science and art will not only re-invent their interactions with society, but they are likely to become even more socially responsible, accountable, and relevant. This is the purpose of closing the triangle of society, science, and art.

What are we likely to lose when we neglect this bridge between science and art? By closing the triangle through bridging science and art within the university, we are able to improve our connection with society and its problems. When this triangle is not closed, we lack additional capacity and opportunity to develop innovative, creative, and functional visions and solutions for a complex range of societal problems. Many problems are becoming so complex that scientific and artistic silos prevent out-of-the-box thinking. While

strong specialization within silos is still very much needed, it is not sufficient to generate creative and innovative solutions.

One can expect at least the following consequences within the university when science and art are not explicitly connected. First, we will not have an ‘infrastructure’ to organize and materialize synergies between science and art. Second, we may not have a structured increase in the possibility (of other types) of serendipity. Third, we will be unable—or at least much less able—to combine scientific research-driven teaching with artistic research-driven teaching. Fourth, in addition to scientific R&D, we will not have artistic R&D, which is connected to creative industries (e.g., serious gaming), to the development of new materials for renovating heritage, to digital spaces, etc.

In the art market, frontline art galleries are called ‘gallerie de combat’. In the same way, frontline universities, organizing cross-overs between science and art, should turn themselves into a ‘université de combat’ to realize resilient communities within our societies.

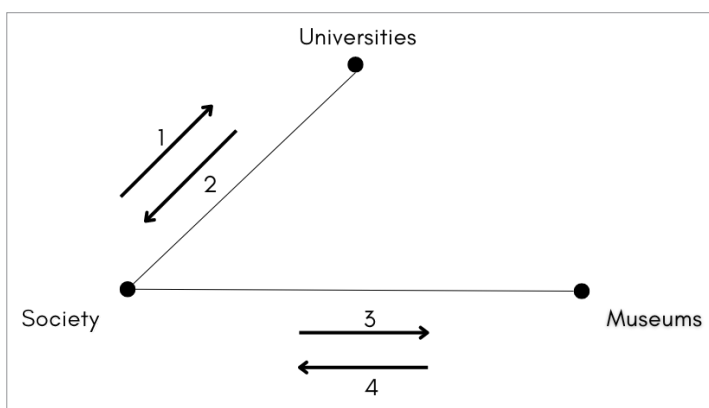


Figure 1: Universities and museums interacting with and within society

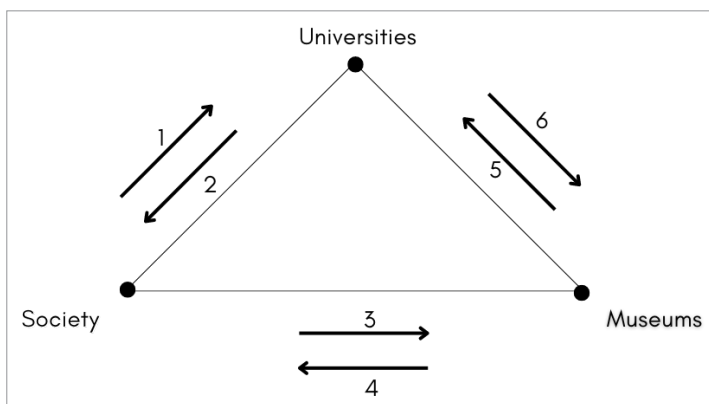


Figure 2: Closing the triangle of universities and museums with and within society

3. Universities and museums (re-)shaping societies

This contribution pleads in favor of the convergence of artistic and scientific cultures, and also advocates stronger interactions between universities, museums with and within society, to strengthen communities (see also Bouckaert *et al.*, 2023, p. 102).

Such a choice has implications for (1) *our education* which needs to be redirected to this togetherness to impact cultures of dialogue, interaction and collaboration of artistic and scientific researchers and professionals; for (2) *our institutions (academies, universities and museums)* which need to be open and communicating institutions with a circulation of people and ideas; for assessing and handling (3) major problems of *our societies and communities* (the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals) which need to be addressed by looking at problems differently and finding new ‘unimagined’ and out-of-the-box solutions; for our (4) *new technologies* (such as e.g. AI or drones), or *new visions of ‘how will we live together?’* (2021 Venice Biennale on Architecture) which needs to push us out of our comfort zone by breaking through our intellectual and institutional silos; and for (5) our combined artistic, scientific, and technological thinking which needs to impact *our societal awareness and our standard patterns of behavior* in the fields of consumption and production, or mobility and travel (visiting cities, heritage, and art) to ensure the sustainability of ‘People, Planet and Prosperity’.

4. In conclusion: strong universities and museums for strong communities

Strong universities and museums have the capacity to shape strong and resilient communities since:

- Internationalizing their staff leads to enhanced diversity within communities;
- Unpacking societal mechanisms leads to possibilities for collaborative governance; strengthening democracy, and protecting the rule of law;
- Creating spin-offs results in increasing the attractiveness of cities and regions;
- Contributing to innovation and creativity brings dynamics into communities;
- Building capacity, and handling risks and uncertainty leads to more resilience and sustainability;
- Making us dream of better futures leads to voluntarism and optimism, by developing new utopias; and
- Developing new visions on society itself helps to prepare citizens for the future.

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