

## Short Essay Take Home Exam - HUMN 323

2. According to Stephan Wilson in "Art and Science as Culture", what are the similarities and differences between science and art? What is his point?

### The Odd Couple Relationship of Art and Science

At first glance, it may seem like art and science don't have much in common. However, author Stephen Wilson is able to link both together by thoroughly exploring definitions of art, science and technology in a chapter from his 2003 book, *Information Arts*. Wilson demonstrates the similarities and differences between art and science, and their future together in an increasingly technological, abstract and visual world.

Often, there is an awareness of the relationships between subjects; sometimes however, that connection has been completely lost. Wilson eases the reader into the relationship between art and science by explaining that "[b]efore the Renaissance, they were united" (5). Arts were "integrated into the fabric of rituals and daily life" (Wilson 5) where creatives, philosophers and naturalists might all be one person. The Renaissance heralded an "era of specialization" (Wilson 5) where the arts and sciences diverged with each taking a different direction. Wilson neatly summarizes the differences between art and science on page 18. Art aims for an "aesthetic response" while science counters with "knowledge and understanding". There is no room for "emotion" in the scientific world, only "reason". Art is often "idiosyncratic" and "visual" while science is "normative" and "narrative". Science is more "explanatory" and hardly "evocative". Lastly, the art world often "breaks with tradition" compared to the scientific "tradition and adherence to standards".

With an odd couple set up like that, it is no wonder that the two areas "developed sufficiently different languages and worldviews" (Wilson 5) that common understanding has eroded over the centuries. Wilson suggests that while technology spread rapidly over the course of the Industrial Revolution, "mainstream art was oblivious" (5) to these changes.

However, these differences complement the similarities between art and science. Advances in technology have created a gradual reunification as artists embrace the Internet, computers, software and more (Wilson 6). More importantly, audiences have come to also embrace art created with, or involving technology, as mainstream (Wilson 10). Artists are now capable of creating works that are not just visual or auditory, but interactive as well (Wilson 10). It is important to note that an artist who uses technology is not one who "necessarily engages science" (Wilson 13).

Wilson acknowledges that the links between art, science and technology are sometimes lumped together or confused, even by artists themselves. He defines science as "an attempt to how and why phenomena occur" with a focus on the "natural world", objectivity, observations and hypotheses (Wilson 12). If science is the "why" then technology is "knowing how" (Wilson 13), usually through tools that enable scientific investigation. Wilson's definition of art is gamely succinct and modern in context as he lists modern art types such as earth art and performance art (16). All of these were created within the last century, "generated by [an] orgy of experimentation and testing of boundaries" (Wilson 16). Whatever the medium, art is still a "process of responding to observations, ideas, feelings, and other experiences" through the "imaginative application of tools and techniques to various media" (Wilson 17).

One of Wilson's strongest points is that in a world where people increasingly use "mediated abstractions" instead of "real things" (23) the arts can regain a foothold. Despite being in the business of breaking tradition, Wilson theorizes that there will be a reluctant acceptance of new technologies in the art world, but he is hopeful at the same time – citing that cinema and photography are now considered legitimate works of art (26) so the same model may be applied to technological and scientific art. At any level of work in a "postindustrial information economy" (Wilson 23), people work with virtual plans, virtual numbers and seemingly virtual people. Symbols, such as buttons and computer icons, are substituted for "physical presence"<sup>1</sup>. Users look to artists to make sense of their world in very subtle ways through interface design, for example.

There has never been a greater time than now for artists to participate in the design of science and technology as well as cultural implications. As long as they "educate themselves enough to function nonsuperficially in the world of science and technology" (Wilson 29) artists can have a foot in both worlds. They no longer have to be distanced from science and technology and "can function as knowledgeable commentators" (Wilson 27) in a negative, positive or neutral way. Like scientists and technologists, artists can use their research skills, observational powers and visual communication talent to comment on "cultural contexts" – "generating new knowledge, cultural meanings, and possibilities" (Wilson 29).

The reunification of art and science is a story that will be told for some time; already 2003 seems like a long time ago. As science and technologists discover new theories about the world and create more inventions, artists can find a place and a voice alongside them; they can even be one and the same again. Wilson's ideas provide a history for this future reunification, where hopefully art, through science and technology, can be elevated to the same level of respect.

## Notes

1. A trendy buzzword in digital design as of late is *skeuomorph* or *skeuomorphism*. This is the tendency to design something that looks old and familiar. Dictionary.com defines it as: *an ornament or design on an object copied from a form of the object when made from another material or by other techniques, as an imitation metal rivet mark found on handles of prehistoric pottery*. Digital examples would include virtual buttons and knobs, eBooks meant to look like real books on a computer display, and wood or leather textures.

## Works Cited

Wilson, Stephen. "Art and Science as Culture." *Information Arts*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003. 3-30.