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Knep Links Science and Art

Artist fosters dialogue between artists and HMS scientists

By [Lauren B. Paul](#), CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In a world of periodic tables and algorithms, it's easy to forget how to let the creative juices flow.

"I find the scientists I work with to be very creative people," says Brian Knep, an associate and the artist-in-residence at the Systems Biology department in the Harvard Medical School (HMS). "What I find kind of sad is that a lot of the science world feels very constrained in a way that's not very good for inspiration in general."

With an obligation to address this concern in mind, Knep has been inviting local artists on a monthly basis to come discuss their work with the various scientists, chemists, and engineers on the medical school campus. By organizing these talks, Knep says he hopes to encourage the explorative and imaginative nature of science that is often subdued by the demands of hard data, precision, and controlled objectivity.

"For instance, you meet somebody who has been spending the last three years trying to find if a protein folds this way or that way," Knep says. "And after a while they figure it out and publish it —but all the wonder and excitement has been sucked out of them."

Knep points to the prevalence of capitalist culture in the American education system, among other societal institutions, as a limitation that is ideal for progress and innovation but not so much for the personal task of exploring the art in each of us.

"We learn science like it's a done deal," Knep says. "You learn the rules and what's happened, but don't really learn it as something that's still happening. We need to learn how to be a maker, how to be a creator."

Yet all hope is not lost for the hard sciences. Instead, Knep has observed intriguing and impressive conversations arising from these collaborations between scientists and artists, whose presentations deal with topics ranging from the discussion of political issues to social aspects of each work and how it ties in to science. As myriad questions and observations are thrown about in this open forum, he compares the experience to actually witnessing the minds of the audience open up.

"There's a bit of timidity since the standards that hold art are different from science," Knep says. "Sometimes they don't know what questions to ask. But I often hear the comment 'I wish I could do that,' —or rather, they wish they could explore it in that way."

Trained as a computer scientist and mathematician, Knep can relate to the scientific perspective and use that background in his role as a new media artist. Using modern tools of science and technology, which he once worked with in the special effects industry, Knep appropriates

universal themes of change, healing, struggle, and acceptance to address the impact of science on our lives.

“As a kid, my parents took me to art museums a lot in New York City,” he says. “I had a deep appreciation, but I had always seen it as something that was done by masters. It was untouchable, not something I could do.”

But it was not until he took the leap into the unknown of the art world that Knep recognized firsthand the value and effect of art. With this personal revelation, he decided to dedicate himself to sharing that experience with his HMS colleagues.

As Knep advises, “You need to be creative in order to have innovation in any field, and the arts is a way to exercise that part of your brain.”

Although practicing the arts helps to round out an individual, Knep says he is also frustrated that art only gains serious acknowledgement through this subordinate role. In using art as an enhancer for other aspects of life, instead of as a legitimate endeavor in its own right, we begin to lose the value of artistic creation itself, he warns.

“People are always thinking ‘How can art help the economy?’ or ‘How can art help innovation in my field?’ It’s constantly getting lost in public policy conversation,” Knep says. “Art for arts sake is a way to open your mind to explore the darkness that might not be so dark.”

In sharing the fruits of artistic labor with the science world, Knep is working to advance artistic expression in today’s society. While artistic creativity and scientific objectivity may appear to be mutually exclusive domains, Knep believes that nobody should be confined to just one way of seeing things.

“There are different kinds of minds, and they are all valuable in the arts and the sciences,” he says.