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LEONARDO THINKS

Editorial: Minding the Gap: Risk Capital and the Myth of Two Cultures

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“Risk Capital” as defined by the world of finance refers to funds made available for high risk, start-up ventures with exceptional growth potential. Human resources and technical expertise are often made available for such endeavors, which offer both the probability of a positive outcome - or profit along with the possibility of a less favorable result - or loss.

What happens if we import the concept of risk capital into the academic setting, not as a means to address the recent trend within higher education to embrace the corporate model and in some cases, substantiate the value of creative work and research in direct relation to profit, but as a tool to tackle the systemic and structural obstacles which have historically inhibited discourse and collaboration between the arts and other disciplines?

It is productive to contemplate risk capital in the context of the academy and to consider ways in which its application could help research institutions committed to multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, crossdisciplinary and transdisciplinary initiatives support high-risk ventures - those which may not produce immediate outcomes but which are nonetheless rich in potential. Could more unconditional forms of support for research and practice located in the so-called “gaps” between cultures – specifically between art and science – lead to the eventual enhancement and re-evaluation of outcomes even in the absence of short-term gains? Can profit take the form of innovation or simply serendipitous conversations that result in the productive exchange of ideas?

The president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Don Michael Randel opened a recent keynote address: *What Researchers and Artists Actually Do* at a conference on *The Role of Art-Making and the Arts in the Research University* by cautioning against instrumental arguments, specifically with regard to support for the arts. Such arguments, which assert that “the arts contribute to the gross domestic product and are good for business are frequently used, but do not emphasize the arts’ fundamental humanity.” Nor should the arts be “pitched to monied interests,” he asserted, “something to make us seem cultured as we concentrate on material goals.”

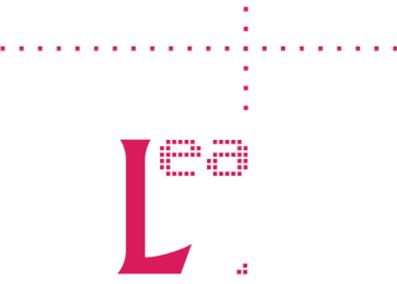


Randall further emphasized that though his motives were good, “C. P. Snow did us a great disservice when he declared that there were two cultures.” This notion was largely addressing the political dimension of the British educational system but Snow’s ideas have since been misconstrued to imply a significant gap between the overall world views of scientists on the one hand and artists and humanists on the other. What we need to understand today is that “scientists, humanists and artists are fundamentally engaged in the same enterprise” and that “this enterprise is at the heart of what the university is about across all of its research and teaching in all of its disciplines. There is, and should be, no such gap.” Scientists, humanists, and artists must “vigorously assert that we are all one in the life of the mind and committed to the pursuits of “curiosity, imagination, and reflection for their own sake.”

If one then accepts the premise of “one culture” – of a shared overall world view, that the “life of the mind” is the coin of the realm and that our current preoccupation with material goals is self-defeating, then engaging risk capital in the academy could not only prompt a re-evaluation of our target investments but support the most innovative, generative and experimental thinking, research and creative work emerging from the gaps between historically divided disciplines. In fact, filling the so-called “gaps” with a little risk capital might engender new emancipatory paradigms, mobilize intrinsic arguments and promote cooperative interdependency between fractured academic domains, typically art and science, effectively eliminating the myth of “two cultures” once and for all.

(quotes from keynote address at University of Michigan Arts Engine 2011 Conference: The Role of Art-Making and the Arts in the Research University)

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