

*Editorial by Sundar Sarukkai*

## The Missing Link in Art-Science Discourse, or Art and the Social Sciences

The discourse on art-science has been dominantly influenced by the natural sciences. Whither social science in this articulation?

Social science begins with a handicap. The disciplines under the umbrella of the social sciences are born with a congenital defect. They are not seen as by-products of science but as discourses that have to be *made* scientific. The natural sciences do not suffer from this constant comparison to other methods and discourses. They are autonomous in the sense that what they do eventually becomes the standard for what constitutes science.

While one might argue that much has changed from the early model of the social sciences, it is nevertheless the case that not only methods but even discursive strategies in these disciplines are often subjected to the unblinking gaze of natural science.

What, however, does all this have to do with the discourse on art-science? I believe that the art-science dialogue has to a large extent ignored the lessons that can be learnt from an engagement between art and the social sciences.

Since technology is often understood as being essentially related to natural science, its role in art forms such as digital art and net art is one reason why the discourse on art-science depends so much on natural science. But why should technology be understood through the idiom of the natural sciences alone? After all, technology arises not only from scientific activity but also from a supportive social and cultural milieu. Understanding technology only through the rubric of natural science negates the complex meanings of technology that arise by viewing it from other perspectives.

The relation between science and art is similar in some ways to that between natural and social science. First of all, there are inherent tensions in such a relation, because art and social “studies” embody characteristics contrary to those of natural science. Themes such as objectivity, truth, evidence, prediction and so on are potentially contentious themes in both art and social science. Discourse on art shares a greater similarity with elements of social science in the emphasis on interpretation, narrative, perspectives and so on.

Moreover, social sciences are unique in the sense that these disciplines are self-reflective about the nature of science even as they model themselves on science—illustrating the uneasy alliance between these domains. Natural science on the contrary does not attempt to articulate the nature of science but looks at science only as a set of practices and methods. Social sciences, because of the contrary pulls within their aims and practices, as well as in response to the “imposition” of a certain type of scientific method, have within them the capacity to interrogate the canons and accepted practice of the scientific method, thereby leading to a more complex understanding of science. Art problematizes science on grounds similar to the social sciences; all the more reason to explore the contours of the social-science response to science in the context of the art-science discourse, perhaps creating a much-needed art–social-science complex.

SUNDAR SARUKKAI  
Leonardo Editorial Advisor  
E-mail: <sarukkai1@yahoo.com>