



PROFILE

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Sharing Science - Attracting Audiences Through Art

In this science communication (scicom) series, members of the Division for Strategic Public Relations suggest ways UTokyo researchers can share their expertise beyond their professional circle. Today we're going to explore how art and performance can bring your research to new audiences in fun and exciting ways.

Let's have a quick recap about what science communication skills we've looked at so far. We've covered writing, public speaking, social media, and communication through audiovisual means and museums. All of these are ways to bring your research to different audiences, and all have something in common: They allow you to literally interpret ideas about your research, in order to put those ideas into the minds of others. Art is different.

What is art?

Art can be frustrating for those who have not engaged with it much, as it refuses the kind of concrete definition we academics love to assign things. But this can be an advantage as it means we can define

it (almost) however we like. For the sake of ease, I will consider art to be the process of expressing feelings about a topic by interpreting it using different mediums and styles.

Everybody engages with art to some degree, whether they realize it or not — it's innately human. Painting, sculpture, music, street art, dance, comedy, crafts, theater, games, poetry, film, and animation are all examples of styles of art. Different people tend to find some kinds of art more appealing than others, and this applies to both audiences and creators as well.

Why art?

You must study what you study for a reason. Why do you love it? What about it fascinates you? Are there aspects of your research or field you find amusing, optimistic, terrifying, daunting? Without a doubt, there will be emotions you attach to different aspects of your research or field. You can communicate more than just facts to an audience. You might wish to make others feel as you do about these topics that are so close to your hearts.

With art you can also reach out to people who might not otherwise be motivated to learn about your particular field. Having worked in a wide range of communications industries, I can tell you that the ability of the arts to reach audiences is far, far greater than that of the sciences. The increasing desire worldwide for science communication demonstrates this.

OK, I'm sold. How do we do it?

The process of creating art from your research is as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. What's great about the creative process is, unlike the scientific method for example, it is entirely unprescribed. If you like making detailed plans and re-drafting ideas repeatedly until you reach a conclusion you're happy with, then go for it. If you have a wild side and just want to get an idea from your mind to the material world quickly and chaotically, there'll be a style for that. What's key about any kind of creativity is really believing the feeling you want to communicate and then figuring out how to make



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your intended audience feel that same way. But that all sounds rather vague, so let's go through a few ideas and examples so you can see what I mean.

Ideas and examples

Maybe you research some phenomena universally considered a problem, like climate change. You are scared about the world that future generations may face. Literal depictions of this future are common and easily ignored, but if you were to paint this feeling metaphorically or even abstractly, what might it look like? Maybe people, objects or abstract forms represent different ideas within your specific area of research. Don't worry if the audience misses the connection between their feelings and the subject matter; it's common practice to accompany any piece of art with labels to provide context.

Perhaps your research involves something more neutral in the way people see it, like technology. One day you might have an amusing thought about how some aspect of a physical object is almost like some more familiar social phenomena. For example, the way signals move around a microchip is a little like people moving around a city. Can

you think of a way to highlight that symmetry in a way that might amuse people? Perhaps a combination of animation and film showing these parallels, with lighthearted music and comic timing?

If your research has a human dimension, then your style options increase. I've always thought that psychologists, for example, are ideally suited to making theatrical dramas from their research, theories or experiences. There are a large number of small theaters in Tokyo, so this goal is more realistic than it might sound. Of course, script writing is an entire course in itself, but my aim is to plant ideas in your heads to prompt you to explore further.

And here are some interesting projects:

- Julia Buntaine Hoel is an artist and neuroscientist who felt some equipment and data resembled sea creatures. So, she made an art installation on that idea. <https://bit.ly/3q6pKvD>
- Sophia Tintori creates animations that use a mixture of visual media to communicate research topics. She mixes literal and metaphorical imagery. <https://bit.ly/3jyQJxa>
- Elie Tanabe is a live illustrator who focuses on environmental and other related issues. <https://bit.ly/3a7NoSW>
- Beata Edyta Mierzwa is a molecular biologist with a passion for fashion. She

designs items of clothing and explains how her research influences these designs.

<https://bit.ly/3rySfCc>

- Angela Johnson is an artist who teamed up with genetic researchers to make a large-scale installation that is both attractive and interactive. <https://bit.ly/2MUBmmR>

And check out these other great ideas, too.

- Dance Your Ph.D. - <https://bit.ly/2Z4tnGy>

- Science haiku - <https://bit.ly/3p6cdTp>

- Stand-up science comedy - <https://bit.ly/3cUpIDf>

Final thoughts

Collaborations with artists can also be a good way to get the process started. When I've worked in museums, sometimes I'd hire an artist to spend time with a researcher whose research I was exhibiting. The artist would learn about, and gain insights into, the research, finding ways to express the thoughts and feelings they and the researcher held in common.

There are a vast number of research areas and artistic styles, so it's impossible to give a broad enough range of examples that will encompass what you study and your preferred art style. But I hope these give you some idea about how to start turning your research into art.