



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Art and the brain*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/84768/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Lloyd, D (2013) Art and the brain. *Psychologist*, 26 (12). 856 - 857. ISSN 0952-8229

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## 'Art on the brain?'

Debate as part of the Battle of Ideas satellite meeting for Manchester Science week, hosted by the Manchester Salon (Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2013, 6.45pm – 8.30pm)

Review for Psychologist Magazine (deadline 5<sup>th</sup> November)

Is headline-grabbing media coverage on the neuroscientific understanding of art (so called '*neuroaesthetics*') another example of '*neuromania*', the current desire to explain all human endeavours through patterns of brain activity? Can understanding the workings of the brain ever hope to explain the magic of music or the power of great literature? In this lively debate a panel of scientists, critics and authors shared their views.

For Philip Davis, Professor of English at Liverpool University and editor of 'The Literary Agenda' reading serious literature makes words come alive in a biological, real way. With Rhiannon Corcoran, Professor of Psychology at Liverpool, they used fMRI to scan the brains of participants whilst they read Shakespeare or modern paraphrases of the text. Reading the original increased brain activity for words not seen in modern language (such as '*madded*') and for pronouns used as nouns (as in this line from *Twelfth Night* '*Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive*'). As explained by Rhiannon Corcoran, these poetic 'aha' moments play with our expectancies and produce prediction error signals from which the brain updates beliefs about the world. They also activate brain reward centres and may be the reason why we find literature so satisfying. George Szirtes, poet, translator and lecturer in creative writing at UEA used Emily Dickinson's poem '*My life closed twice before its close*' to demonstrate how we are forced to become interested in the person in the poem by physically re-enacting the emotional experience. But can neuroscience tell us anything more about that experience? This question was addressed by Raymond Tallis, humanist philosopher and author. He presented examples of neuroscientific studies on music, art and literature to demonstrate their lack of functional specificity: the same brain areas that respond to music that gives you 'shivers down the spine' also activate to other rewarding stimuli such as food, sex, drugs (and presumably rock 'n roll). What's missing in brain imaging studies is the person and how we interpret music or art based on our own experience.

So is it better to talk to people about art than look at their brain and does neuroscience tell us anything more? A lively question and answer session discussed these and other points including what it means to describe a Wayne Rooney goal as 'sheer poetry'! Many agreed that the neuroscientific understanding of art is of interest, it provides one level of description of our aesthetic responses, but it shouldn't try to explain everything. Neuroscience is after all, the study of the nervous system. Neuroaesthetics might tell us more about brain function but whether it will tell us more about art is still open to debate.