

What Is Research in Contemporary Art?

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Research in the arts is quite different from research in engineering, which turn is different from scientific research. It is more akin to the humanities in its attention to the particular rather than the systemic, but it creates knowledge via aesthetic as well as critical inquiry, and engages material and embodied experience as well as concepts.

Like other modes of research, art research generates portable knowledge: it generates insights, how-to's, why's that can be shared by more than one individual; what is learned in the context of one art project can be applied in a different one. Like research in other domains, art research has its own archive, but whereas historians use textual archives, and anthropologists use materials gathered in fieldwork, art research's "body of literature" is the body of prior works and the critical commentaries surrounding them. Like other research, art research is open-ended, we cannot declare in advance what is the "deliverable": if we already know the answer, then we would not need to do the research.

Art research is not the same as art practice. Why should that be the case? Not every artist shares her working knowledge with her peers, nor need she do so. Art practices range widely, and a large part of their vitality comes from their autonomous ways of making.

Ethics of art research vs. art practice. In art research, experienced artists mentor less experienced artists not solely to realize the principal's design in work-for-hire relationship, but as potential peers. To be clear, although art research is informed in an essential way by practice, it is not practice: it is reflection upon practice. Practically speaking, the fruits of art research are not presented in galleries, theaters, or other exhibition venues, nor are they directly or necessarily for art production. Mentoring in art research has the quality of individual mentoring in the humanities predicated not on grant projects but on persons.

Still, art research *differs* from other modes of research in significant ways. There is no single model, but speaking generally, art research *generates* questions, it opens up frames of reference, and rigorously investigates questions concerning value (vs. fact), desire, and imagination.

Art research can amplify social, cultural commentary but along aesthetic and poetic as well as critical dimensions. And art researchers can open up discourse about society or culture, but rather than promoting a particular methodology, it can draw general knowledge from the creation of concrete, and particular things or events. Indeed, an invaluable aspect of art research is that it rigorously investigates the cultural and human imaginary the way that philosophy investigates social and individual knowledge: by constructing precise and memorable questions about what perhaps may have been taken for granted.

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