

# Art as Research: On the Art of Art Research

Published in: [GIA Reader, Vol 24, No 3 \(Fall 2013\)](#)

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*This is part of the special section, [Art as Research](#).*

The research conducted by artists can and generally does differ from the research conducted in other fields like the natural sciences, social sciences, or even in the other branches of the humanities. Researchers in fields as varied as physics, journalism, anthropology, and oncology are trained to avoid personal, fanciful, subjective interpretations and responses to data. Those scholars who do not adequately remove or distance themselves from their work can be seen as politically motivated operatives, charlatans, or at the very least, lacking in intellectual rigor.

In contrast, deploying idiosyncratic interpretations and responses has been very much expected of artists, and for some, this is the essence of what an artist should do. In an interview conducted for this article, author Tisa Bryant said of artists and research, “Most academics are trying to prove or test a theory with their research. In contrast, artists may do research to discover, without a need to prove. This is not to say that academic research is without discovery, but it is a means to a different end.” The assumption that artists use research in idiosyncratic ways is so ingrained in the popular notion of what an artist is, that the trickster art duo Komar and Melamid built an entire body of work designed to upend the expectation of the artist as purveyor of his or her idiosyncratic perspective. They polled people in fifteen countries to determine what the most-wanted painting and least-wanted painting would look like. They asked about preferred colors, themes, and content. The resulting paintings, “America’s Most Wanted Painting,” “China’s Most Wanted Painting,” et cetera, are remarkably similar, with lots of blue skies, prominent bodies of water, and small humans in the foreground. Only details differentiate the most-wanted paintings of one country from that of another. “America’s Most Wanted Painting” features George Washington and deer standing before an expanse of blue water and blue skies. “Kenya’s Most Wanted Painting” has the requisite landscape of blue skies and waters, but in the foreground, along with a small cluster of Kenyan tribespeople, are Jesus Christ and a hippopotamus. By obeying the research-based opinions of the masses, painting the most popular content (landscapes, animals, admired people, lots of the color blue) in the most popular style (representational), they made a protracted visual joke based on the perverse idea that one can remove individual artistic expression from a work in order to create the “most wanted” art.

The research of artists can be stubbornly, promiscuously nonlinear in its approaches and results. “I was doing family genealogy research in Barbados,” says Tisa Bryant. “Years later, I have yet to use that genealogy research. The kinds of research that I ended up using were incidental things that I found. I found a ship’s log. The ship carried Portuguese people and slaves. It had these numbered columns,

numbering the slaves, and everyone else had proper names. I'd never seen that before. I was stunned. All the Portuguese people were Jewish. And it was right around Passover. I got invited to a potluck Seder. There were a lot of people around me with breast cancer, or cancer scares, and all of these disparate things converged in one literary piece. My uncle had actually helped me get to Barbados to do this research. He expected a more straight-ahead narrative about our family. I gave him the chapbook I wrote based on my research and travel, he said 'I don't understand. What is this? I thought you were going to do something else.' So did I. I talked to him and laid out that whole family narrative that he wanted, but what I really came up with was something artistic. I never realized while I was doing the research that it would come out this way."

In a discussion on art and research, multimedia artist John Leaños further elaborated on the transformative power of artists who turn research and data into something else. "Artists are asking different questions than others," he said. "We're asking questions about what impact something has, but it's different because we're trying to figure out how to make an esthetic object or experience from what we've learned or are learning. This is what makes artists special. This transmutation of traditional research and knowledge — that is where the magic is. Artists can engage a problem and have a solution that is hard to grapple with, that is beautiful, that is completely unexpected."

Artistic research may involve historical documents and statistics, but these factual data regularly become the basis for fictional conjecture and confabulation. In the late 1990s, Leaños was part of a collective of artists focusing on the impact of the digital revolution on communities of color.<sup>1</sup> "We were trying to figure this out issue as it was happening," he recalled, "and we couldn't find the answers from the digital theorists and activists of the day. We did our research, but our creative interpretation was required to fill the informational gap."

Researching can be a deeply emotional and even spiritual experience for artists. In conducting research for a graphic novel about my father's history of labor, I traveled to his boyhood city of Mexicali, Baja California. Mexicali is right on the US–Mexico border, joined at the fence to the city of Calexico, California. I checked into a motel just a quarter mile from the border crossing, with the idea of walking into Mexico through the pedestrian crossing. As soon as I left the air-conditioned confines of the Travelodge, I began to heat up. In just a few minutes, I was drenched with sweat. This is a desert climate, so being hot is to be expected. But the burden of the heat was shocking. I began walking down Avenida Cristóbal Colón and berated myself for not wearing my big straw hat. I knew my father had worked these scorching streets as a barefooted newsboy, but now I also understood in my body the way that extreme heat oppresses everyone and everything in the environment. I felt the heat through the thick soles of my sneakers, and as I imagined my father's small, bare feet walking in the triple-digit heat, my heart cracked. Sweating, feeling my heartbreak, all of it was research.

I have been speaking of research as a process for informing artmaking, but I believe strongly that there

is not always a division between research and artmaking. Sometimes an artist can research, and then make her or his art, and realize afterward that the artmaking is in itself research. My most recent suite of drawings are meticulously rendered images based on black-and-white photos of body tissues and organs taken with electron microscope cameras. I used a subtractive method of drawing, erasing from a field of charcoal to expose more or less of the paper beneath and create an image. It is a slow, laborious technique, and each drawing took fifteen to thirty hours to complete, depending on the complexity and size of the image. As I labored over each drawing, I engaged in a deep meditation on the very nature of photography, reproduction, and magnification. I was still researching at the drawing table. Even now, a year later, I am still mulling over the ways technology gives us prosthetic eyes to see in unprecedented ways. The drawings are done, but the research goes on.

I have been both a practicing artist and a grantmaker, and I understand how the fluid nonlinearity built into artists' research can be difficult for grantmakers to get behind. This is especially true if grantmakers are tightly focused on art project work plans, calendars, and specific deliverables, with little accommodation made for the happy accidents and eccentric, looping detours artists often take in their process, the delayed effect of researching, and yes, the dead ends. But if grantmakers want to support artists comprehensively, they should stand ready to support the research phase(s) of artmaking, and they must make room for hearing the true, often fragmented story of the research process, the one that is often downplayed or absent in grantees' final reports and evaluations.

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#### Note

1. The late-1990s art collective "Los Cybrids" included John Leanos, Rene Garcia, and Praba Pilar.

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