

Using Our Archives

a workbook for facilitating
art-centered research

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This project began with a trip to the Art Libraries Society of North America conference in 2024 where I learned of innovative efforts librarians are making to empower artists' research with their collections. From this inspiration, I developed my ideas into a workshop the museum for students at the University of Iowa to help them use our collections. It subsequently grew into this workbook to help provide structures that build the museum and other campus collections into art making.

In this workbook, I offer a toolkit for reflecting on one's art practice as research and present strategies to utilize archives in a way that is targeted to visual arts researchers' information-seeking behaviors. I hope to help form a clearer path for constructing artistic research that is easily articulated, understood and undertaken in the context of academic scholarship.

Framing Art as Research Creation

What is it?

Research creation is the idea that artwork is created through a series of inquiries into a variety of resources: From history, literary texts, historical and contemporary art, social situation, fiction and non-fiction writing, personal life experience, socio-political climate, etc.

How can we use it?

In the context of academic scholarship, research creation is a tool which validates and supports information seeking behaviors of artists as research.

It is a framework for writing and speaking about artist practices. Essentially, it establishes that there is a process of development from which ideas form. This may sound obvious, but just simply and explicitly acknowledging this process can empower us as artists to validate ourselves and our work, and more easily speak and write about it.

Basic structure:

Ideas emerge from inputs, and from them we create outputs. Research inputs are interdisciplinary; they span a broad swath of subjects which influence the artists' research output. These inputs stem from lines of inquiry, which describe a subject area of interest.

Here is an outline to break it down:

Subject area: This could be narrowed to Library of Congress Subject Headings for your ease of browsing the stacks in the library. Sometimes I find my subject heading and then just read the spines of the books until I find something interesting, open the book to a random page and read a paragraph. That process can be surprisingly fruitful.

Line of inquiry: These can be broad ideas or questions that may or may not have answers. They are things I'm curious about, and curiosity often drives my artistic practice. What are the questions I am hoping to answer and then share. These could be visual concerns, about the user's experience with the work, they could be anything.

Examples of research inputs: It is important to name personal experiences on equal footing with scholarly inputs. The broad range of input is part of what makes visual art so nuanced and expressive. Art is not saying only one thing, idea or expressing a single perspective; it is, by nature, complex.

Examples of research outputs: This can be a list of artwork ideas that inspire mockups.

Subject area:

Line of inquiry:

Examples of research inputs:

Examples of research outputs:

Practice-Led Scholarship

This is a framework that contextualizes the creation of work through a material practice as scholarly inquiry:

wood-block printing, a traditional type of back-strap weaving, letterpress printing with lead type, creating handmade papers from foraged and manually beaten fibers.... etc.

My favorite analogy for this framework is thinking about two historians that write about the history of butter. One historian reads what they can about the process of making it throughout history, and the other uses historical models to reconstruct butter churning equipment from different centuries and then proceeds to make the butter. Both understand the process of making butter in very different ways.

The historian who sweats over building the butter churn, making the butter, and then proceeds to eat the butter on a homemade loaf, is understanding something about the material history of butter that the other does not. They understand the physical labor, the sensory feelings, and the areas of difficulties that needed to be troubleshooted.

Through this process, the researcher connects to buttermakers who came hundreds of years before them. The perspective of engaging in material practices and situating oneself as a part of the lineage of making, connects us to past makers and their experience. It strengthens our understanding of and personal connection with the history of the work we do.

The aim of practice-led scholarship framework is to empower us to see the process of making itself as scholarly inquiry. Art making is a process where we are always learning from the thing itself. Artists use that experience as scholarly inquiry which constitutes academic research. This kind of research can be described in a number of ways: experimental, improvisational, playful, investigative, question-driven, etc. The way we describe it should reflect our attitude towards the undertaking of the making process. In artist statements, we tend to use these words loosely and without defining how they manifest in our artistic research. Being concrete about how practice-led scholarship shapes the questions and outputs of our research can help us talk honestly and confidently about our practices and create a strong connection between the subjects of research and your research methods.

utilize a dictionary or thesaurus in your writing

What kinds of practices lead your scholarship?

List some words that might describe them:

Combine them into a concise and meaningful statement:

Qualitative Methods in Visual Arts Practices

What are they?

Qualitative research methods is an umbrella term for types of research methods that deal with non-quantifiable data. The artist's work is well suited to this kind of data gathering and organization, as it is often not hypothesis-driven, but rather, driven by internal curiosity and relationship with materials. Quantitative data is measurable while qualitative data is often anecdotal or categorical.

Most people in the visual arts approach their thoughts and feelings through circuitous routes to develop "conclusions." We collect experiences, or pieces of knowledge, and allow them to lead us to the final work. This process creates something very different than a chart, or any kind of hard conclusion of $X+Y=Z$. Art deals with nuance, and that which cannot be exactly defined. To me, the beauty of making art is creating space for nuance and uncertainty, which inhabits so much of life.

A methodology is a way we gather and organize information. It is that circuitous route that is taken to produce the output. It may be a repeated habit of the maker, or a process that changes with the demand of each project.

Internal methodologies: I keep a notebook full of idea lists, when I am inspired by a situation, experience, or phrase, I write it in my notebook and collect the language. / I have a practice of sketching every day, drawing forms that I use to build mock-ups. I compile the forms into a working visual database.

Material driven methodologies: I collect found materials and create improvisational mock-ups, driven by my connection with the material, reacting to the materials in conversation with one another. / I keep a garden and document the stages of growth for my plants, sketching from them and collaging those images together with recipes.

Database and archival research methodologies: I choose a subject and browse the open stacks of the library, pulling out a stack of books and reading 5 random pages in each book. I write down language that resonates with me and connects to my personal experiences. / I search closed stack databases to find [keywords related to my work]. I spend time with those materials, writing and sketching from them in the reading room, I study how they were made, how the materials look and feel, the writer's tone of voice... etc.

Describe your methodologies for gathering data

Data organization and output creation:

A research methodology describes how the data gathered is organized and how it is used to create outputs. It might also outline why each step of the process is significant, and how it enriches the research output. It can demonstrate how data is ingested, manipulated, synthesized, enriched, and how the final output comes to be. It can explain how work takes on meaning.

Describe your research methodologies from input to output:

Browsing and Developing Lines of Inquiry

Database and archival research are the research methodologies least accessible to artists. Most databases are not hospitable to the information-seeking behavior of artists—viewing a wide swath of related materials to find a gem of input. This section of the workbook will delve into how to better foster this relationship between the artist and database.

A goal of all libraries, but art libraries especially, *needs* to be empowering artists to enrich their research with the use of archival material. The difficulty of searching closed stacks as an artist-researcher is that we have very different parameters of research inputs than hypothesis-driven researchers. We often don't begin with keywords, and material with the potential to inspire us can be exceedingly broad. There is a dichotomy between traditional, question-driven research and curiosity or material-driven research, which is more common in the arts. Unfortunately, these systems are less designed to accommodate artist-researchers because we are looking for discovery processes that are not pre-planned.

Though this kind of research may seem unwieldy to the keepers of information, its extreme breath is essential to the artistic process and can be accommodated through targeted, open-ended browsing strategies.

In the Open Stacks:

Return to your subjects and lines of inquiry from earlier, take these words and their synonyms and use them to find your relevant subject letters. Keep a list of these relevant subjects (classifications) and their corresponding letters. Here I'll use Library of Congress (LOC) as an example.

Some letters may take some digging; if we're looking for cookbooks, that's under TX (T – Technology, TX – Home Economics), You might also then see TT (Handicrafts, Arts and Crafts) and want to look at that. Just browsing these subjects can give us a sense of where we need to search. Find this at “Library of Congress Classification Outline.” The number code following the letters narrows the topic further.

T – Technology; TT – Handicrafts; TT697 Home Arts / Homecrafts, includes sewing, embroidery, decorative arts.

Take these letters and go to the library, browse the spines and pull out a stack of books, read some of the introductions or flip through pictures. Look in the back at their bibliographies for other related books, write those down. Subject libraries like art libraries might be limited to just a few letters but many sub and sub-subclasses. Go there first to see what's available.

Create one list per letter or organizing factor:

Classification:

Subclass:

Sub-subclass:

Classification:

Subclass:

Sub-subclass:

In the Archives (Closed Stacks):

Artist book collections, fragile zines from the 80s, recipe pamphlets, print edition books, etc., will mostly be found in closed stacks. These are special collections, museum collections, archives, and historical societies. Usually, we will find similar organizing factors and can use the same initial organizing protocol for non-LOC organized collections.

Classification:

Keyword:

Results:

Often you'll have to make an account, and access individual objects by requesting them in online databases. Use these same broad browsing strategies there. Read finding aids or category descriptions in these websites to more easily understand subject categorization. To navigate these databases effectively and with the wide breadth needed to maintain our browsing spirit, use organizational tools.

___/___/___

Research Log

Inquiry Key Words / Objectives:

Database	Search terms / filters	# of results	Quality / relevance	Notes

Result Notes:

References / Further Reading by Subject:

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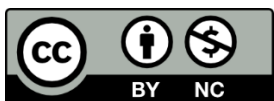
Browsing and Developing Lines of Inquiry

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