Art in America

Research Art is Everywhere. But Some Artists Do It Better Than Others.

By Kavior Moon | March 8, 2023 11:47am

"Research," art historian Tom Holert wrote in Artforum in 2010, "is increasingly the stuff of which art is made." His comment is confirmed by a number of observations made by globe-trotting art critics. Claire Bishop characterized research-based art as "a hallmark of Western biennials" in her review of the Havana Biennial in 2009. Susanne von Falkenhausen lamented the "didactic overkill" of research-based art in her review of Documenta 13 in 2012. Last year, in these pages, Emily Watlington remarked on the "umpteen didactic, research-based works" in her review of the Berlin Biennale.

How did this come to be? On the institutional front, art schools have been establishing programs and centers for "artistic research" and "research-creation," particularly in Canada and across Europe, for more than 20 years. In 1997 the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki established an early notable doctoral program for artists; two decades later, PhD degrees in art are available in multiple countries. Globally renowned curators such as Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, and Ute Meta Bauer made their careers organizing large-scale international exhibitions often laden with research-based art and organized within a curatorial framework predicated on theory. Now, there are professional artists with research-based practices teaching their students various research methodologies and encouraging the production of yet more research-based works.

The current trend has an even longer historical trajectory when related to artists and their motivations. One might find traces in the work of Leonardo da Vinci or 17th-century naturalists such as Maria Sibylla Merian. Hito Steyerl, a contemporary research artist par excellence, describes the formal and semiotic investigations of Soviet avant-garde circles in the 1920s as formative for research art today. In her 2010 essay "Aesthetics of Resistance? Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict," Steyerl discusses authors, photographers, and self-proclaimed "factographers"—including Dziga Vertov, Sergei Tretyakov, Lyubov Popova, and Aleksandr Rodchenko—whose epistemological debates centered on terms such as "fact," "reality," and "objectivity." From Constructivism, in which artists were redefined as designers, technicians, and engineers engaged in developing new approaches to constructing forms, emerged the program of Productivism and the associated method called "factography."

Factographers aimed to chronicle and analyze modern life, particularly through texts, photography, and film. They did not claim to portray reality objectively and impartially (as opposed to conventional documentary makers) but rather to actively transform reality through ideological acts of signification, through new modes of production and collective reception. As Steyerl reminds us, "fact comes from [the Latin] facere, to make or to do."

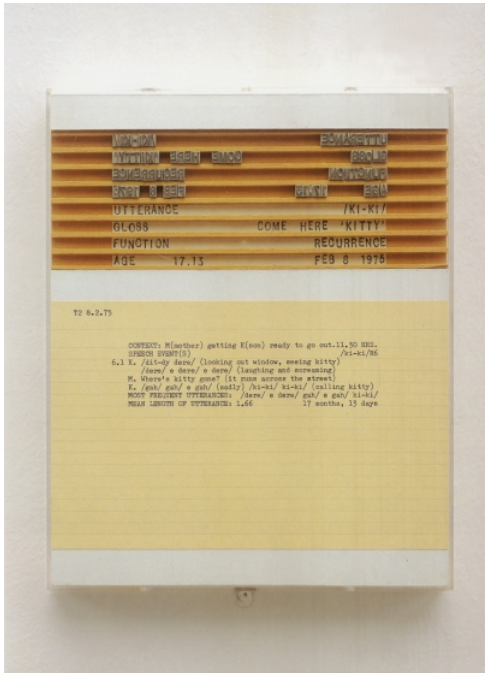
Another pivotal moment in the historical development of research-based art came with the conceptual turn in art in the 1960s and '70s, particularly with the emergence of institutional critique. Moving away from formalist painting and sculpture, Conceptual artists contended that the idea or concept of an artwork (not its physical form) was the art. Texts, diagrams, photographs, and other forms of matter-of-fact documentation feature heavily in the works of Conceptual artists Joseph Kosuth, the Art & Language group, Mel Bochner, Hanne Darboven, and Christine Kozlov, among others. From this point of view, art can be seen as a transmission of "information," the term curator Kynaston McShine used to title his landmark Conceptual art survey at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970.

WITH ARTISTS INCLINED TOWARD INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE like Hans Haacke, one begins to see research not just informing the work of art but becoming an essential part of its content. A significant early example is Haacke's Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971 (1971), which was made using extensive information that Haacke found in the New York County Clerk's records. The work is simply a presentation of facts: it comprises 142 photographs of building facades and empty lots, maps of the Lower East Side and Harlem indicating each property's location, and texts and charts detailing information about transfer of ownership, land value, and mortgage lenders.

With prolonged viewing, one notices that the many corporations that owned the properties were actually run by notorious landlord Harry J. Shapolsky and his relatives and associates, who bought, sold, and mortgaged the properties within their own real estate group. The shell corporations effectively obscured the properties' ownership ties to the Shapolsky family as well as the tax advantages these inside deals conferred. One of the city's biggest slumlords at the time, Shapolsky had previously been indicted for bribing building inspectors and convicted of rent-gouging.

For institutional critique artists, research became a key means to investigate and expose various social systems and the sociopolitical context of the art world. In doing so, the aim was to show how what we consider "art" is not timeless but in fact socially constructed, powerfully conditioned by the conventions and normalizing practices of art institutions. Haacke's Shapolsky et al. was one of the reasons the artist's major solo show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum that year was famously canceled after then director Thomas Messer accused Haacke of "muckraking," calling his work "extra-artistic" and a potential "alien presence" within the museum.

Although Haacke clearly made visible the machinery behind one of the most lucrative real estate operations in New York, the more fundamental threat, art historian Rosalyn Deutsche has pointed out, was how his work would have framed a series of slum properties against the museum's pristine space, revealing it as a highly controlled space of material privilege. Deutsche persuasively argues that Haacke's work implicitly raises questions about how proprietorial interests shape not only urban space but cultural spaces as well—a line of inquiry that Haacke and other institutional critique artists would develop in subsequent research-based works.



Mary Kelly: Post-Partum Document, Part II (Analysed utterances and related speech events) (detail), 1975, letterpress text on paper and inked rubber type both mounted in wooden type holder, typed text on index card, paperboard, 23 panels each 10⅛ by 8⅛ inches.
PHOTO AGO/©MARY KELLY

THE LAST MOMENTOUS SHIFT in the 20th century occurred around the 1980s and '90s, as more and more artists used research to inform their works reflecting feminism, postcolonialism, queerness, and other forms of identity politics. An early example is Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document (1973–79), a six-part series that juxtaposes documentation of the artist's experience as a new parent and the development of her son during the first six years of his life with research on the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan. A feminist critique of Conceptual art as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis, Post-Partum Document presents the mother-child relationship as an intersubjective exchange of signs between mother and child.

During these decades, artists often used archival materials or the form of the archive in their works, making research-based art to recuperate overlooked histories and marginalized figures or groups. In her landmark Import/Export Funk Office (1992–93), Renée Green presented books, magazines, photographs, cassette tapes, videotaped interviews, and other source materials taken from both her library and that of German cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen, creating an

extensive audiovisual archive of international hip-hop and African diasporic culture in the United States and Germany. Hal Foster termed this tendency "an archival impulse," looking at the works of Tacita Dean, Sam Durant, and Thomas Hirschhorn.

Another artistic approach entails questioning the authority and authenticity of archives by pointing out their inherent biases. Between 1989 and 2004, Walid Raad developed a collection of both found and fabricated materials—documents, notebooks, photographs, news clippings, interview transcripts, and videos—related to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–91). His archival displays, presented under the guise of an imaginary foundation named "The Atlas Group," blend fact and fiction to deconstruct the truth claims of documentary media, and bespeak distrust of official narratives, while also exploring the links between history, memory, trauma, and fantasy.

ONE CAN SEE a variety of research-based approaches in the practices of numerous artists today, applied with varying degrees of success. Some critics have voiced skepticism of much research-based art currently in vogue. In a 2019 lecture at the Kunsthalle Wien, Claire Bishop decried many research-based artworks as "information overload" and mere "aggregation" without hierarchy or narrative in ways that are symptomatic of our "browsing" habits in the internet age.

While a number of artists have used research as a crucial component in large-scale works—Steyerl in her immersive installations, Hirschhorn in his sprawling "monuments" to various critical theorists—others favor a more understated mode: pared-back, subtle, and visually economical. These artists often start by researching objects, ideas, events, or sites, and pair their installations with detailed supplemental texts that make one reconsider the presented materials in light of what can't immediately be seen, often intangible issues of historical context, social injustice, and the law.

Maria Eichhorn, a second-generation institutional critique artist, bridges that now-established approach with the practices of younger research-based artists. For the 1997 edition of Skulptur Projekte Münster, she used the production fee she received to purchase a plot of land near the center of the show's host city. Declaring the vacant lot a public sculpture, she titled her project Acquisition of a plot, Tibusstraße, corner of Breul, communal district of Münster, plot 5, drawing attention to the site's recent history: years prior, residents had mobilized to stop the building of luxury condominiums there, and formed a tenants association to protect the availability of affordable housing.

Eichhorn exhibited a copy of the plot's purchase contract and deed in the Landesmuseum, alongside a booklet detailing her research into the origins of cities in Europe, the historical establishment of land registers and real property, and the problem of affordable housing in present-day Munster. Instead of installing a piece of decorative "plop art," Eichhorn prompted visitors to reflect on the economic and social realities of everyday urban spaces and the conflict of public and private interests. At the end of the exhibition, the artist sold the plot back to the city and donated its resale value to the area's tenants association.

More recently, Eichhorn has focused on goods unlawfully obtained by the German state. For her 2003 exhibition "Politics of Restitution" at the Lenbachhaus in Munich, she worked with historian Anja Heuss to research the provenance of 15 paintings in the Lenbachhaus's art collection on permanent loan from the Federal Republic of Germany. After World War II and until 1962, the Allies sought to return art objects stolen by the Nazis; after that, the remaining 20,000 or so unclaimed items were declared state property. Heuss determined that 7 of the 15 paintings were likely stolen or forcibly taken from their Jewish owners. Eichhorn displayed these paintings so as to reveal the markings on the reverse that document how they changed hands over time. She also exhibited another painting in the Lenbachhaus's collection that was formally restituted just a year earlier to the heirs of its original Jewish owner.

Chronicling how these paintings got to where they are begs a follow-up question: what other objects currently in public collections were wrongfully taken by the state? Eichhorn's 2017 Documenta project built on her work at Lenbachhaus, but dealt more actively with restitution. In Kassel, she created a project called "The Rose Valland Institute," to investigate the looting of all forms of Jewish-owned property, not just artworks, since 1933. Her multiroom installation centered around a towering shelf filled with books from the main public library in Berlin. A wall text claimed that the nearly 2,000 volumes on view were once owned by Jewish persons and unlawfully acquired by the municipal library in 1943. Eichhorn also displayed photos, auction records, inventory lists, and other documents related to the confiscation of Jewish-owned assets, artworks, books, and other material possessions, as well as a reference library of publications on these issues.

Viewers also learned from accompanying texts that the Rose Valland Institute is an actual functioning organization, based in the Neue Galerie in Kassel for the run of the exhibition (and now in Berlin), whose mission is to return the

looted items to their rightful owners or their descendants. Eichhorn's project provokes viewers to actively question how objects in the country's public collections were acquired, and to make their own restitution claims or provide other pertinent information.

Like Eichhorn, Cameron Rowland displays found objects accompanied by detailed handouts that elucidate the dark histories the objects index. Rowland's work often addresses racialized exploitation and its ongoing effects, such as a piece titled Assessment (2018) that comprises an 18th-century English grandfather clock once housed at a plantation in South Carolina, and three 19th-century receipts that show property taxes were collected on slaves, clocks, and livestock alike in slaveholding states.

At the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Rowland displayed Assessment alongside used everyday objects—leaf blowers, a hedge trimmer, a stroller, and bicycles—placed casually around the gallery. These items were purchased at police auctions of goods taken through civil asset forfeiture, a legal proceeding in which law enforcement can seize without warrant property believed to be connected to illegal activity. Originating in the English Navigation Act of 1660 to maintain England's monopoly on trade with its colonies and West Africa, civil asset forfeiture has since thrived in the United States. Today, it is practiced by police departments as well as federal agencies including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Astoundingly, Rowland notes in their text that in 2013, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency under DHS, contributed $1 billion in seized property to the Treasury Forfeiture Fund.

Just as property taxes on slaves were used to fund state governments in the antebellum South, auction sales from civil asset forfeiture are used to fund the agencies that seize properties. Together, the objects in Rowland's show link issues of property concerning enslaved and undocumented people to highlight the dispossession and profiteering that results when groups of people are denied the protections of citizenship.

Where Eichhorn has focused on restitution, Rowland spotlights reparations. For Disgorgement (2016), part of an exhibition at Artists Space in New York, Rowland established an entity called the Reparations Purpose Trust, evidenced by framed legal documents on view there. Through this trust, they purchased shares of the insurance company Aetna, Inc., which had once profited from issuing insurance policies on the lives of slaves to slaveowners. The trust is to hold these company shares until the US government passes a law to make financial reparations for slavery, at which point the trust will dissolve and give its shares to the federal agency responsible for making the payments.

Where Rowland has focused on reparations, Gala Porras-Kim proposes mediation as a form of redress. In her project "Precipitation for an Arid Landscape" (2022), first presented at Amant in Brooklyn, she displayed works centered on Maya objects collected by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. In several large drawings, collectively titled "Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum," she depicts objects found in the Chichén Itzá cenote, a sacred Maya sinkhole in Mexico. These objects were originally deposited as offerings to Chaac, the Maya god of rain, lightning, and thunder, but between 1904 and 1911, the American diplomat and archaeologist Edward H. Thompson dredged them up.

A circular enclosure in the center of the gallery displayed photographs, documents, letters, newspaper clippings, and other publications from the Peabody archives and elsewhere, enabling viewers to learn about the troubling circumstances that brought the objects into the museum. Thompson purchased property around the cenote in order to access it before smuggling the artifacts into the US; an 1897 Mexican law made exporting antiquities illegal.

In a framed letter to the Peabody Museum's director, part of a work titled Mediating with the Rain (2021–), Porras-Kim points out that the desiccated condition of the Chaac objects is at odds with their intended wet state. The objects were meant to remain in the cenote, where they had been preserved in water. Exposure to air and the excessive dryness of the museum's climate-controlled storage rooms have permanently changed their physical composition. Now, she notes, the objects are "just dust particles held together through conservation methods." Porras-Kim suggests opening a dialogue on how the objects could at least regain what she calls their "dignitary interests" and thus be spiritually restituted in some form. One idea she has proposed is to designate the objects as owned by the rain and "on loan" to the museum.

In combining artistic research and institutional critique, artists like Porras-Kim and the others surveyed here are critically interrogating the institutions thought to be arbiters of authority. In other words, they are researching research to question the norms of knowledge production and to challenge the status quo. Rather than conducting investigations in order to present conclusive results, they unsettle and expand how we can see the world with all its inglorious pasts.