How to make research-driven art

For TCI x Are.na's Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources, Caroline Sinders shares how her art practice manifests research into knowledge.

★ Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources
★ View Caroline's Are.na channel

August 16, 2018 -

As told to Caroline Sinders, 1567 words.

I started my art career in a space that already felt like the middle of a Venn diagram: photojournalism. What did it mean to sit between the medium of photography—decidedly now an art form, although historically it was considered a science—and journalism, which is not an art form but rather the act of researching, reporting, and documenting the truth?

To me, photojournalism felt like a space in which truth could be embodied in an image, and the image could resonate with us, sit with us, and show us. In this way, it felt like art—but also like something else.

Photojournalism has a specific purpose, and a specific intent. It is a way to use art to uncover, document, and share truth. I don't consider myself a photojournalist anymore (I now make art with and about technology), but I haven't forgotten the teachings of this intent-driven photojournalistic practice. These days, I still think of myself as someone who seeks to capture truth, much like a photographer does—just without a camera.

As I've moved away from photojournalism, I've applied its frameworks towards a new methodology I call "research-driven art." Like photojournalism, research-driven art uses specific structures and a sense of purpose to constrain it. These constraints work much like a skeleton works: while they stabilize the practice just as a rib cage stabilizes a body, they do not define the entire practice, nor keep it from moving and flexing on its own. In this way, the research I do stabilizes and shapes my art, but does not dictate the outcome.

As I've continued to develop my practice of research-driven art, I've decided that the outcome (i.e. the manifested artwork) can be anything that helps externalize my intent: a tweet, a series of unique works, a data set, an essay, or anything else that manifests research and the exploration of an idea into a creative form that other people can access.

As I've made decisions about what research-driven art can and cannot be, I've thought a lot about how other artists make work with a sense of intent. Tania Bruguera, the creator of Arte Útil ("utilitarian art"), uses art as a tool to accomplish an intended outcome. My work moves in the opposite direction: I start with an intent, and then use art as a tool to enable research and exploration around an idea. The art I make is less about accomplishing a goal, and more about exploring and uncovering a form of truth.



Escuela de Arte Útil, via YBCA

Bruguera writes, "'Useful Art' is not something new… it is a practice that has become a natural path for artists dealing with political art and social issues. All art is useful, yes, but the usefulness we are talking about is the immersion of art directly into society." This utilitarian, socially minded approach to art-making calls to mind Ana Cecilia Alvarez & Victoria Campbell's "Sex Ed" classes held at BHQFU and elsewhere.

Campbell and Alvarez, writers and educators, created a series of workshops exploring sexuality with the ultimate goal of producing a communication-based, pleasure-oriented, and politically engaged course about sex and sexuality. In my mind, these workshops count as both a manifestation of art-driven activism (Arte Útil), and as research-driven art. Again, art doesn't have to be an object—with research-driven art, an "artwork" can take the form of a workshop, a presentation, a manifesto, a class, or a school—anything that manifests research and knowledge.

I love the description of Alvarez and Campbell's "Sex Ed" workshop because of the care with which it was written, but also because of the breadth of knowledge and research it exudes. It feels charged, activated, and intent upon driving equity in a space that all too often gets co-opted by political agents:

Workshops will be fun, rigorous, safe, and sexy. Each theme will be an attempt to make sense of—in critical terms—sexual relations on a social or cultural scale. While there will be "theory" involved—and some theories more than others—our approaches will be propelled by the ways in which we can translate concepts into questions, and questions into practices. How can we orient our sex lives around pleasure and intimacy, rather than capitalist structured patterns of gains and losses? How can we undo not just the structures of domination aimed at our own bodies, but also those aimed at repressing the possibilities between bodies? How can we be more deliberate with one another? And more responsible for one another?

This is a perfect example of research-driven art, as it creates space for intent-driven research and exploration to take place. There are many other examples of research-driven art that inspire my practice. A few of my favorites examples of other artists/collectives that take a similar approach are Jenny O'Dell, Hyphen Labs, Mimi Onuoha, Adam Harvey, Heather Dewey-Hagborg, Auriea Harvey, and the work of Forensic Architecture. All these artists use research as a tool to guide their practice as a whole, as well as to structure the pieces they create.



Mimi Onuoha's "Library of Missing Datasets" (2016)

How, exactly, do you create research-driven art?

A research-driven artwork generally progresses in three stages. At the beginning, it's about having the intention to explore an idea, and then (you guessed it) researching that idea. The middle stage focuses on moving and shaping an idea as you learn and explore. This part of the process is gray, beautiful, and middling—you have to follow where the idea leads. Lastly, it's about considering possible manifestations or outputs that feel appropriate for containing and sharing the body of knowledge you've accrued. This manifestation should be greatly shaped by the research and guided by the question(s) you're seeking to answer (i.e. your intent). The whole research-driven art process is about building a foundation of knowledge and exploration, and then constructing a manifested "artwork"—which can be anything—on top of that.

Here's a taxonomy outlining best practices for making research-driven art:

Constrain your intent

Define what you're looking to explore: is it something open-ended, like a question or a topic? Or is it something more specific, like a data set or a specific place?
While you don't need to set out with any intended outcome (this isn't Arte Útil, after all), it can be helpful to loosely consider what you'd like to accomplish.

Go deep and wide with your research

Focus on a set of core questions, but also give yourself time to chase small threads.
Build out your research and your argument almost like a skeleton: the bigger or more related questions will make up the ribs, the spine, and the legs, but every big project will have smaller pieces of related information and questions (the finger and toe bones, if you will).
Talk to experts. Is there someone whose work seems somewhat related, albeit tangentially? Talk to them to dig up related ideas.

Consider your research methodology

Will you be able to defend and backup the findings in your research?
What are your sources? Are they balanced? Are they trustworthy?
Could someone else replicate your findings?

Collect ephemera

As you research, create lists, collect post-it notes, write down and review the questions you've had, record conversations with experts (let them know you're recording), take screenshots, conduct polls, and even ask your friends questions.
Create an archive or database to collect your ephemera—later, this may become part of your manifested artwork.

Group and analyze the ephemera

This is the hardest part—as you wind down your research phase, take a bird's-eye look at everything you've collected. Try to see what patterns or stories are emerging.

Think about how to group it, how to store it, what seems most important, how it could make sense to share it, etc.

Lastly, manifest your research into something

This "something" can and should be anything: a GitHub repo, a workshop, a presentation, an essay, a video game, a poem, a sculpture, an article… the list goes on. Deciding on the form of your art is completely up to you.
Share what you've made with others. As I see it, the best research-driven art is a manifestation of a body of research that will be helpful and interesting for others to engage with.



From Caroline Sinders' Feminist Data Set's Workshop at SPACE Art and Technology, October 2017

As you consider how to manifest an intent into a finished work of research-driven art, I recommend thinking about how you can most fully interrogate the idea you want to explore. Challenge yourself to fully embody it, and push it to extremes.

If there's any takeaway I hope people get from my practice of research-driven art, it's that as an artist, you're not just limited to creating art objects. Instead, your art practice can manifest itself in many, many different ways. Think of your research as part of the artwork, not just as a means to an end, or as the discovery process for finding an ultimate answer. There's so much richness and value in spending time researching, and the exploration of an idea can be a creative act in and of itself.

For the Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources, I've collected examples of successful research-driven art for you to explore. □

Name
Caroline Sinders

Vocation
Designer, Researcher, Artist



