

How to make research-driven art



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



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As told to Caroline Sinderson, 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 BHOPI](#) 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:

Lastly, manifest your research into something

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.



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.

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

Caroline Sindors

Designer, Researcher, Artist



