Reclaiming Artistic Research

Expanded Second Edition
Lucy Cotter, ed.

HATJE CANTZ

Reclaiming Artistic Research

Expanded Second Edition

Lucy Cotter, ed.

HATJE
CANTZ

Contents

Artistic Research in a World on Fire

Lucy Cotter

Writing this, I am looking out on a garden that has hardly seen rain for three months. Its drought is witness to the encroachment of climate change, and the air outside is tainted by smoke from a distant wildfire. Yet today, the patter of my fingers on the keyboard is accompanied by the sound of rainfall, which is causing green grass to sprout out of the barren yellow. Slowly but surely, it takes over: here a few blades, there a flurry, until the overall sense of lack starts to recede into memory. It will not disappear entirely. Large plants that

seemed hardy have not survived; small ones are alive but struggling to thrive. It is a landscape that resonates with "post"-pandemic reality, where the human losses are permanent, where many are suffering from long COVID, and where the long evisceration of the lifeblood of the arts is still being felt. Arts programming has returned, yet it is not an easy transition. The arts landscape is still parched and struggling to reckon with its evident unsustainability, its precarious working conditions, the founding violence of many of its institutions, and its long histories and continued practices of exclusion.[1] In a world desperate for new ways of thinking, for alternate visions, and seeking radical social, cultural, and political transformation, artists are necessarily becoming more ambitious with their goals for artistic research.

In the United States, where I have been based since this book's first publication in 2019, artistic research does not have an established discourse related to debates about artists doing a PhD, as it does in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as well as in some locations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[2] "Artistic research" circulates as a free-floating term in the mainstream art world, little-noticed, it seems, except that more and more artists who engage with wider social, cultural, and political questions in their work describe their practices as research-driven.[3] There is an urgency to this work that is palpable and exceeds institutional demands or critical intellectual trends. Among other recent experiences, a two-year curatorial conversation with artist Christine Howard Sandoval, who attends to Indigenous-Hispanic legacies as she negotiates what is present and what is invisible in the physical landscape, brought home to me that much work being done by artists in the US—the first-hand archival research, the

original thinking, the forming of connections through transdisciplinary inquiry, and the forging of relationships among and between people, and institutions—would not be done otherwise.[4] Indeed, artists worldwide are doing important cultural work that is not being done otherwise. In contexts where this inquiry is outside of governmental priorities, or even against national interests, this work exists and is being done with little support. In most countries worldwide, few sources of funding exist for the kind of long-term artistic projects that make especially significant contributions to wider social thinking and action. This is among the reasons why it matters now to look at artistic research and critically reflect on its wider value. What kind of infrastructural shifts need to take place to support artists to undertake significant artistic research on its own terms?

What are an artist's responsibilities (and possibilities) in a world that is on fire?[5] I hope that the publication of this expanded second edition of *Reclaiming Artistic Research* will further support artists, critics, curators, and art's many publics to articulate and embrace the singularity of what art does and has the potential to do in the world, at an individual and collective level. In this edition, I engage in four new dialogues with US-based artists Stephanie Dinkins, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Yo-Yo Lin, and Richard Mosse, whose practices navigate and exceed the studio-gallery system feedback loop in thoughtful and provocative ways, while attending to questions of human and nonhuman survival, self-care and collective care, new technologies, and the unlearning of ableist, gendered, sexist, and racist paradigms. Our discussions build on the twenty dialogues with artists (and curators) from the first edition to offer insight into what artistic research is in day-to-day

practice. The dialogue form, which is based on oral knowledge, was chosen because it resonates with (embodied, material) artistic thinking in its ability to circle back over thoughts and peel into multilayered processes. Each of the contributing artists' and curators' practices in this book are singular, yet these dialogues are also in dialogue with each other, circling around overlapping areas like sound and spatiality, or engaging with questions such as the nature of history, or the reimagining of the body. The polyvocal echoing return of many qualities of artistic research points to some shared ways of knowing and unknowing in and through art practice.

HOW DOES ART KNOW?

The phrase "artistic research" establishes a connection between art and knowledge. It suggests that academics and scientists are not the only ones who can undertake original research and contribute new knowledge to the world. Initiated by artists, artistic research often comes into being through highly intuitive processes, and its unfolding through practice follows the inner logic of artistic processes, rather than academic protocol. It does not depend on an academic context or academic forms of research. This book is titled *Reclaiming Artistic Research* because there has been a tendency to view artistic research in academic terms, and thus overlook its singularity and potential. As I discuss in the introductory essay to the first edition (republished in this book), this misperception stems partly from the close association of the term with discourses surrounding the establishment of a PhD in Fine Art, in which programs often legitimate artists' knowledge production with academic criteria.[6]

Yet, artistic research has many lives beyond the university context.

It is commonplace for artists today to engage with subjects outside of art, from environmental sciences and emerging technologies to disability studies and immigration flows. Yet, it remains underrecognized that these artists are not simply borrowing ideas or illustrating or creating aesthetic versions of existing academic subjects. Rather, many artists (including my interlocutors in this book) seek to create new questions and new forms of knowledge, using the kinds of embodied-material-conceptual thinking that goes hand in hand with art making. In doing so, they are often pointing to what has not yet been thought, what remains unknowable, or what has been overlooked or misperceived because thinking within the related field has been limited by the shapes and forms of standard academic research. (I use the term "non-knowledge" in the dialogues to refer to knowledge that exceeds formal categories of intellectual knowledge, often lying not only in unknown areas but extending into the unknowable.) Artistic making processes involve imagining, creating, and sometimes prototyping new forms, which can as easily take the shape of a social arrangement or a model for repurposing artificial intelligence as a traditional artwork. Similar types of thinking involving gathering, finding new constellations, imagining forward, and experimenting with possibilities exist as a continuum across these art practices. Even the most abstract work can involve artistic research processes.

Artistic mediums of all types lend themselves to ways of thinking beyond language, and even beyond consciousness. (I address these qualities more fully in my introduction to the first edition.) In its material fluidity and medium-specific processes

of making visible, audible, spatially or materially palpable, contemporary art can bring about different multisensory modes of witnessing. The artists in this book were invited one by one, so that the medium-specific ways of knowing and unknowing unfolding through their practices could be built upon through each subsequent dialogue and considered from other facets. I have titled the dialogues to help orient the reader toward these underlying areas, and to make visible overlapping concerns among artistic bodies of work that may not immediately appear to be in dialogue with one another.

Instead of building on what is tangible, artistic research can pivot toward paying attention to human absences. It is attuned to gaps and strains in knowledge, rather than only what is evidently there. Through radical archival interventions and oral-material creations, artists can find ways to manifest and engage with the fragmentation and dispersal of human histories in ways that the formal discipline of history struggles (and often fails) to do. This matters in a world in which the traces of marginalized peoples, enslaved peoples, disappeared peoples, peoples who have been forced to migrate, and/or who have faced genocide and extinction seek to claim their own histories and trajectories. In our dialogue, artist Euridice Zaituna Kala described how, when she did archival research into the history of the eighteenth-century Portuguese slave ship *São José Paquete d'África*, she was faced not with ample material, but near silence on the 400 enslaved Mozambican people's experiences. Being an artist, she had other means of moving forward. "I am the archive," she realized, and continued this research by retracing the ship's journey with her own body and leaning into transgenerational embodied knowledge.

It is often through gathering fragmented, dispersed, invisible, unarchived cultural memory, and seeing the resemblances between forcibly separated materials and areas of thinking that a community or a culture can imagine forward. In grasping continuities across locations and temporalities, they can "move forward—both internally and externally."[7] The capacity for artistic research to bring together material, textual, and embodied sources of knowledge lends itself to these processes in ways that other (academic) forms of research seldom can. Artists bring the imaginative force and the associative, combinatory thinking of art making to bear on these materials, leading to potentially unforeseen outcomes.

In a new dialogue for this edition, Yo-Yo Lin points to art as a space for unlearning interlocking paradigms of ableist, racist, and anti-queer thinking. She leans into nuanced transcultural imaginaries around the body and incorporates experiences of chronic pain, chronic illness, and disability to create platforms for connectivity where new bodies of knowledge can be formed collectively. Like many artists in this book, Lin's work is multidisciplinary, cross-cultural, and intersectional. Art's long-held freedom to work in post-disciplinary ways enables artists to expand their research into the many facets of the subjects they address.

Several artists in this book self-position their practice in terms of the complex relationship between art and activism. Living in the United States, I have been strongly reminded of the ongoing need for artistic research into subject areas that are not wanted or are dangerous or undermining to governing bodies. Having witnessed first-hand the brutality of police violence, while living in Portland, Oregon through the 100-plus days of protest following George Floyd's murder in 2020, I deeply

appreciate Forensic Architecture and Bellingcat's project, *Police Brutality at the Black Lives Matter Protests* (2020–present). By geolocating and verifying over a thousand incidents of police violence, analyzing them according to multiple categories, and presenting the resulting data in an interactive cartographic platform, this artistic research is of widespread legal and sociopolitical importance. (Artist and audio investigator Lawrence Abu Hamdan discusses his work with Forensic Architecture in our dialogue.)

Artists can be keen researchers of scopic regimes, surveillance, and visibility because of their expanded visual registers and expert visual cognition.[8] Fluid thinking around media enables artists to use existing technology for different purposes than its inventors intended. In a new dialogue for this edition, Richard Mosse discusses multiyear projects like *INCOMING*, for which he repurposed military surveillance equipment to foreground the catastrophic conditions of migration into Europe. His latest film work, *Broken Spectre*, repurposes multispectral technologies used by multinational mining companies and redeploys scientific UV microscopy photography to create one of the most extensive and nuanced documents of the destruction of the Amazon rainforest in existence today. These artists' work is not made without risk, and in a world where the political climate is increasingly polarized and tightened, artists' relative freedom of speech and social visibility are crucially important assets.

The ethical and social repercussions of emerging technologies are constantly unfolding, and artists continue to address these questions in provocative and publicly accessible ways. The world is currently on the precipice of an artificial intelligence-led knowledge revolution that is mostly

market oriented. It is no longer possible to talk about knowledge production without reflecting on these tech-led epistemic paradigm shifts, in which artificial intelligence's algorithms favor predictability and therefore the dominant and the known. In doing so, they herald in forms of "digital colonialism," "technological redlining," and the "default discrimination" brought about by artificial intelligence's logic of inclusion/exclusion.[9] Artistic research lends itself to counteracting the resulting absences and gaps in knowledge thanks to its tendency to move toward the invisible, the neglected, the unknown, and the unrecoverable. In another new dialogue in this edition, Stephanie Dinkins, one of the leading artists in the US, engaged with AI and emerging technologies, discusses what can be done and why it needs to be done by people from all walks of life, artists included. Moving beyond reactionary critique, Dinkins's interactive and immersive work offers models for reorienting emerging technologies toward social benefit, equity, and collective care.

As artist Cannupa Hanska Luger proposes in another new dialogue, technology is ultimately not mechanisms but ideas, and "[a] lot of Indigenous technology exists in our cosmology, in our homes, in symbols we create, in forms we express through dance and music" that "has not been allowed to navigate through material science and mechanisms."[10] In his ongoing *Future Technologies* project, Luger imagines past the exodus of the wealthy to other planets to consider adaptations necessary for the future survival of Earth. In resonance with Dinkins, who identifies the underrecognized knowledge and survival strategies handed down by enslaved peoples, Luger reminds us that this moment of impending

environmental collapse is not the first time his people have faced extinction.

SELF-REFLEXIVE KNOWLEDGE

Artistic research may offer competing paradigms for knowledge in today's world, but it cannot neglect its own foundations. As Tom Holert summarizes: "The more contemporary art is accounted for and addressed as a platform, system, or institutional space of research, investigation, epistemological speculation, and decolonial struggles for the recognition of subaltern, Black, feminist, queer, Indigenous and other marginalized yet powerful modes of knowing and thinking, the more it is confronted with the task of understanding its own roles in the general intellect's current manifestations."[11] While many artists and arts workers have worked toward equity for decades, this moment of mainstream awareness of social justice issues offers ripe conditions for the art field at large to confront the problematic foundations and exclusionary norms of contemporary art's modes of existence and operation. The scope of artistic research, which exceeds the production of artworks, offers space to redefine artistic practice. It can be a means of challenging dominant definitions of contemporary art and, by extension, exploring alternatives to white cultural supremacy in arts institutions. In our dialogue, Cannupa Hanska Luger observes: "I work in an industry where art is considered an object, the thing that somebody makes. That couldn't be further from my personal definition of what art is. Art for me is the making. It is these processes that have been passed down from teacher to student, from ancestor to elder. It's a continuum. It's intergenerational."[12]

Contemporary art discourse's self-proclaimed autonomy and porous yet often inward-looking relationship to art has occluded the crucial question of how art relates to culture. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay points to the historic establishment of the art museum as a repository for colonially looted objects, leading to a necessity to present (art) objects as outside of living culture.[13] Some of the other legacies of colonial regimes of visibility and categorization of subjects and objects include the individual authorship inherent in the modern artist-function, which naturalizes the apparent cultural neutrality (and default whiteness) of artists in the West. Art has been rarified into something inactive and in need of preservation, and its decontextualization is reflected in the "professional" (distancing, socially detached) protocol for curators, art writers, and institutional workers.[14] What is the relationship between the self-perceptions of the art world as a field and how art operates (and co-determines perceived cultural value) in the world? These are questions artistic research discourse cannot skip over. The title of this essay is inspired by a Zoom-based performance by artist Pope.L, which exposed the performativity of the artist's position in society and the structuring force of the art world, which cannot assume to separate itself from a world at large that, in fact, "has always been on fire."[15]

Wider inclusivity in the art world matters as a means of reconnecting institutions with a more expansive sociocultural and political reality and as a way to counteract historically inbuilt measures of exclusion. This is not a simple matter of adding onto existing ways of thinking and working, but rather the bringing in of conflicting paradigms that should reorient institutions to question and relativize the narrowness of previous

working paradigms. I felt this sense of reorientation when an artist in a workshop I attended asked, "Why does the art world always seek to 'include' the disabled in its activities, rather than asking what we are working on and thinking about and asking if they can join us?"[16] Julie Philips thinks far beyond the token acknowledgment of artists who are mothers when she observes that the life-altering and lifelong experience of maternity forges bodies of knowledge that are not otherwise available.[17] In her dialogue with Katayoun Arian in this book, Grada Kilomba offers a powerful reflection on the knowledge that is otherwise lost when people of color are not present as leaders and co-shapers of art institutions.[18]

It matters not only which artists or artworks are included in art discourse and institutions, but *how* they are included. Attending to artistic research as an entry point into all artists' practices offers an important counterweight to the identity-led framing of so-called diverse artists because it draws attention to competing cultural paradigms and alternate bodies of knowledge. Curator Karen Archey notes that institutional hyperfocus on an artist's biography is a way of cutting corners in the contextualization of these artists' work.[19] This covers up the inevitable lack of institutional knowledge and the paltry research undertaken within the tightly budgeted timeframes of the contemporary art institution. (The authors of *Post-Critical Museology* suggest that the contemporary museum can better let go of its claims to representativeness and return to serious research on art.)[20] Too often, "diverse" artists' work is represented in issue-led terms so that the institution can profit from the currency of hot topics, with discursive simplifications overshadowing the full complexity of an artist's inquiries. The

artistic (material-spatial-embodied) sensibilities in their practice go under- or unaddressed, creating a false separation from other ("neutral") artists whose work is perceived as medium-led, abstract, philosophical, poetic, etc. (I have addressed this issue elsewhere in more detail.)[21] By undertaking in-depth dialogues that are three to four times longer than the standard artist interview, this book seeks to make space to articulate artistic practice in ways that keep these complex form-content-context relationships intact.

Many artists' work deliberately resists easy legibility as a counterweight to the tendency for the identity-driven neoliberal knowledge economy and click-bait-led public discourse to flow toward transparency and simplification. In response to the hypervisibility that accompanies identity-oriented framing of Black, feminist, queer, crip, and Indigenous practices, many artists embrace opacity, in Édouard Glissant's sense of a refusal of individuals or communities to be cornered into declaring an essential identity or essence in the face of the "transparency" demanded by dominant culture.[22] This doesn't make these artists' practices immune to opportunistic misframing, however. Artists today face difficult ethical decisions in this respect, as the sustainability of their practice or their livelihood is often dependent on contradictory opportunities. There is much to learn from artists who push back against this institutional and critical capture. One artist with whom I worked curatorially toward a site-specific performance requested to title the work with an untypable word-image, and to replace the usual press release with a crossword.[23] These gestures extended the critical ethos of the performance into all of the conditions of its production, exposing that standard formats are not neutral, and that curators and institutions

have the agency to rethink and change them, should they so wish, or, as is often the case, "if they are willing to give something up."[24]

There is no such thing as a neutral container for art.[25] In considering how artistic research enters the world, art writing is an important interface to the public, as language is a source of security in the face of relatively opaque artwork. However, I increasingly think about the perfunctory role writing plays in the art world, which can limit the possibilities of creating a more nourishing and generative relationship between art and language (and the public). Several dialogues in this book manifest a move away from academic writing toward questions of how language itself can unfold new ways of thinking. (Sher Doruff writes from the position of inter-species; Manuela Infante writes in structures that follow plant thinking.) Several artists play with how text relates to objects, space, and territory (Falke Pisano sees where language ends and the object begins; Sky Hopinka uses song and calligrams to meld imaginaries and places). More and more artists, art writers, and curators are forging experimental writing practices that help to shift the status quo, and it seems that the publishing landscape is starting to make more space for the gray areas between the artistic and the literary, where artists' experimental material-spatial-embodied-led writing can thrive.[26] Having experimented widely with the "affordances" of different genres and writing styles that resonate with artistic practice in conversation with artists working at every level, I am excited to be working on a new book that will address writing as an artistic process and medium.[27]

EMBODIED MATERIAL KNOWLEDGE

Beyond the immediate concerns of the specific artistic practice at hand, what is at stake in the questions surrounding artistic research is a radical questioning of what defines and constitutes knowledge in the world – in university contexts, in the public discourse and the policies they inform, in our own minds and those of everyone we love, who has inherited and internalized these habitual ways of thinking through normal everyday life. This legacy includes the artist's sense of inferiority in the academic context, which relates to the inferior positioning of embodied, material, spatial, and lived knowledge relative to linguistic and numerical knowledge (with resulting narrow definitions of intelligence). The dominant consensus around what constitutes thought, or knowledge, art or culture is, of course, historically constructed. Its epistemological foundations lie in Enlightenment thinking from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant et al.). Europe's territorial imposition and power over peoples worldwide was partly justified by and made successful by the global indoctrination of defining and enforcing this white supremacist, Western form of thinking as the only real form of knowledge. This left on the scrap heap the forms of knowledge, worldviews, and ways of thinking intrinsic to over 80 percent of the world's population. The extent to which one feels included or seen within dominant definitions of knowledge, art, or culture complexly relates to this historical and continuous dynamic of internalized oppression and the embeddedness of this exclusionary logic in the norms of discourse and institutional logic. (As an extension of direct exclusion, imposter syndrome is a daily reality for many artists and art workers.) Among many

other losses, the Enlightenment epistemic shift toward empiricism, rationalism, and scientific methodology meant that all human knowledge that lay beyond linguistic consciousness (over 90 percent of thinking) was (and still is) sidelined.[28]

With its fluidity of frameworks, and foregrounding of embodied, material, spatial, transgenerational, and temporally multidirectional knowledge, contemporary art offers possibilities to push against, question, and destabilize Western academia's epistemological monopoly, bringing in openness to other ways of thinking. Art "can provide in rare but important cases the very organizational structures, theoretical devices, and material contexts to sustain multilayered work on the dislocation and repurposing of knowledge itself."[29] This is why art's affront to (Western) academic knowledge is an important partner in efforts to decolonize knowledge in the university, and in our own minds. With its foregrounding of oral, material, and performative registers of knowledge, artistic research is starting to be recognized as a unique point of entry for Indigenous knowledge within academic contexts globally.[30] Art inherently aligns with and can support the work of activists and academics seeking to decolonize and to center Indigenous ways of knowing. The potential for artistic research to co-shape this wider negotiation of epistemological parameters is one reason why it matters now, more than ever, "to draw a line between conformist, depoliticizing ways of associating knowledge with art" and "the quest for different, oppositional modes of knowing" that many artists today choose to prioritize.[31]

I once attended a conference in which a young academic was struggling to articulate yoga as a form of embodied philosophy. It struck me that her argument would have been more successful

had she invited her audience to do yoga together, precisely because most of yoga's knowledge is available in and through the body, bypassing conscious thinking and language. Because art's ways of working encompass inseparable body-mind and subject-object experiences, a comparable falling-out of knowledge happens when academics expect to be able to understand art's forms of knowledge through academic paradigms. In my "Reclaiming Artistic Research" essay (republished here), I reflect on what happens in the university context when artists undertake PhDs with expectations of having art's forms of knowledge recognized and embraced, only to find themselves in situations where academic requirements force them to prioritize already existing and nameable ideas and areas of interest over the opaque unfoldings of art practice.

The dominance of academic thought over artistic thinking is not only relevant in the university context, however. It is present whenever critics and curators attend to artistic research with the expectation that it will resemble or can be addressed using the paradigms of *academic* research. There will, in many instances, be overlaps with academic fields, and the long-standing theorization of those findings can contribute to deepening artistic inquiry, if this is done meaningfully. Too often art is framed using the most well-worn cultural theory, instead of looking further to find deeper resonances in the work of thousands of academics globally, thinking about overlapping questions. (This could be the entry point into collaborative co-thinking, instead of reinforcing knowledge hierarchies through critical juxtaposition of world-renowned thinkers with emerging or less established artists.) This is among many reasons why the PhD in

Fine Art needs to be reoriented toward its stated ambitions of articulating practice-based knowledge.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay, I have elsewhere tried to articulate why practice-led thinking needs to be identified and nourished in curatorial discourse.[32] Practice-led curating unfolds in similar ways to artistic research processes and this kinship sets up the conditions to do more justice to artistic thinking. For those of us who started to curate as a way of attending to fellow artists' practices, curating is often led by material-conceptual and spatial-embodied thinking. This allows for a collage-like creation of thought-constellations and a material-spatial unfolding that cannot be expressed in critical jargon or academic terms. To curate in this way is in fact to say something that writing cannot capture. Today, when it is more and more difficult to fund exhibitions that are not designed to engage click-bait attention spans, I wish to emphasize that exhibitions have the potential to be experimental working sites. Their physical, spatial, and material presence can make space for ways of knowing that are embedded in the body, that make us see the performativity of knowledge; that make us witness the connection between voice and word, movement and body, space and subjectivity.

The exhibition's variety of modes of experiencing opens possibilities for anti-ableist forms of accessibility and its ability to draw attention to the performativity of knowledge opens possibilities for the decolonization of thought.[33] Exhibitions offer an unparalleled opportunity to attend to and foreground the value of the "extra-discursive significations of Indigenous art and culture-making."[34] Prem Krishnamurthy once wrote that exhibitions should be permanent, which is a powerful reminder that the knowledge (and

potential paradigm shifts) exhibitions can produce should be taken more seriously.[35] Moving beyond simple notions of inclusion, and respecting the right for Indigenous "unbelonging" within given institutional structures, what might it look like for Indigenous values and principles to more fully inform and challenge the dominant frameworks of curatorial discourse? How can the rich multiplicity of Indigenous forms of knowledge "reformulate in unique and complex ways" the very concept and practice of curating?[36] How might the paradigms of artistic research support this process?

TEMPORAL SHIFTS, A MORE HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ART PRACTICE

When the first edition of this book was published, I was concerned that the absence of images might block artists from engaging with each other's practices, but something unexpected happened. Not being able to make quick aesthetic judgments, there was more space for artists to focus on what they have in common. This reminded me how often artists are set up to compete with one another, and how by being constantly asked what makes our individual practices singular, a sense of collectivity is undermined. As the pandemic brought to the fore, art is one of our survival mechanisms on an individual and collective level; it does not belong to a market or even to its makers, its temporalities are much longer. In our dialogue, Cannupa Hanska Luger suggests that art predates *Homo sapiens*, an expanded temporal framing that is reflected in some curatorial practices that work from Indigenous principles.[37] I want to close this essay with a reflection on why the notion of artistic research might alter temporalities within the process of day-to-day art making and help to shift public awareness and infrastructures toward