Arts Research:
An Explainer

Some art is itself research.

With this paper, a2ru has twin goals:

1. **to help make arts research legible** on college and university campuses.

2. **to suggest concrete action steps** that promote a culture supportive of both arts research and arts-integrated research (collaborative research including arts and other disciplines).

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About the term "arts research"

"Arts research" covers a rich and varied range of activities. There is lively conversation about what comprises it and even what it should rightly be called.

Internationally, the term "arts research" vies with "artistic research," "art-based research," "creative inquiry," "practice-based research," "arts research/creative practice,"and others, each term with its own nuance and fine-grained understanding. We use the term "arts research" throughout this paper. For the purposes of this paper, we adhere to a broad understanding of the term.

We argue for the idea that art-making, or "creative practice," itself can constitute research. At the same time, we recognize that it doesn't always; not all art-making *is* research and some artists reject that label. In some institutional settings, it is advantageous for artists to frame their creative practice as research.

This paper draws on a2ru's large-scale study of 38 research universities as well as additional interviews with Deans and Directors of research, arts research, and creative practice.

Key Take-aways

- Arts research can include both quantitative and qualitative understandings familiar in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. However, an arts way of knowing often extends beyond words and numbers to the aesthetic, sensorial, and subjective.
- Arts research is many things. Arts research can take the conventional forms of a scholarly article or book as well as art forms like a painting, dance, or musical composition. Creative making can be (but isn't always) a research methodology.
- Researchers in other disciplines might look to arts research as a model for reconsidering embedded assumptions about research processes and output, and for celebrating the question-focused, expansive nature of research inquiry.
- Concrete institutional support in the form of policy, organizational structures, and funding can help arts research thrive on campus.

1. Explaining arts research

Arts research: An introduction

Often, on-campus as well as popular understandings of "research" default to research in the STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine) disciplines. The concept of "arts research" is unfamiliar to many people.

Some research university policies refer to the original work of faculty as "research, scholarship, or other creative activities." By explicitly calling out "creative activities," this definition recognizes and legitimizes arts practice; it's more accommodating than policy that uses the word "research" only. However, naming "creative activities" alongside "research" can imply that creative activities are separate from research activities. Here, we hope to shed light on the idea that creative activities can themselves constitute research, and to explain the concept of arts research in general.

Fundamental to this explanation is understanding that **the arts offer ways of knowing that often extend beyond words and numbers to the aesthetic, sensorial, and subjective**. One interviewee's anecdote illustrates how knowing through the arts can function differently from knowing through (in this example) reading:

> When I was an undergrad, I studied [choreographer Merce] Cunningham and I was able to answer questions on a dance history exam about why Cunningham was an important shift in 20th-century dance. But I remember seeing The Cunningham Company for the first time a year or two after college....all those things I'd been taught about Cunningham, I suddenly experienced. And I remember sitting in my car afterwards and being like, oh, I suddenly had a new way of seeing... It sounds sort of hokey to say, but I really was like, Oh, I see the world differently. To think about what constitutes indeterminacy—which is a natural phenomenon, a social phenomenon—sitting in the audience and watching an artwork that *is* that blew my mind.

By acknowledging that not everyone understands the world through narrative and numerical modes, the university moves closer to broad inclusion, as arts ways of knowing overlap with, for example, neurodiverse and indigenous ways of knowing. One interviewee notes that this is one of the contributions of the arts to the university: the assertion and demonstration that there are ways of knowing beyond the quantitative and the verbal.

The arts often have different epistemologies, cultures, methods, and outcomes from other disciplines, and can be quite disciplinarily distant[1] from natural and social sciences, law, business, and even from their near neighbor, the humanities.

One way of understanding what makes the arts—and by extension, arts research—unique is to consider what the arts *do*. The intrinsic impacts of the arts have been identified as intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, spiritual, and social[2]. One interviewee added that the arts give us a way of talking about difficult things in our culture. She gave the example of the COVID-19 pandemic: she perceived that the role of medicine, science, and engineering was to mitigate and reverse the virus's impact, while the role of the arts was to provide objects and experiences to help people

make sense of the fear, isolation, and anxiety of the time. The arts have many other cultural and social functions as well.

These impacts and functions begin to demonstrate how disciplinarily distinct the arts are; few other fields and disciplines refer to emotional or aesthetic impacts. **Because of this disciplinary distance, we expect research in the arts to look different from research in other fields.** For example, research in STEMM fields often happens within a problem/solution framework, and it values veracity and replicability. Research in the arts is more often exploratory and speculative, and it traffics in ambiguity and subjectivity. It involves a layer of the individual's response or interpretation that is usually not present in STEMM research.

So what is arts research? The definition at best has multiple interpretations and at worst is the subject of passionate disagreement. There is agreement, across the literature on arts research and across a2ru interviews, that it takes many forms. Within the arts, there are subdisciplines whose research practices are different and may not be mutually intelligible, and across this diverse field there are numerous types and purposes of arts research. One interviewee notes, "...there's not one thing, and it [arts research] needs to be differentiated and defined."

What Is Research? and *What Is Arts Research?*—a2ru publications grounded in 444 interviews with faculty, leadership, staff, and students at 38 research universities—offer several entry points to understanding arts research, providing important resources for our explanation.

The form of arts research that is perhaps most familiar to other disciplines across campus is "Humanistic Scholarship and Social Scientific Research about the Arts[3]." Here we see methods (e.g., historical or qualitative research) and outcomes (e.g., scholarly books and articles) that feel familiar across the university. One interviewee describes a colleague's reconstruction of musical scores found in Auschwitz:

> She's been reconstructing those and...making them legible for performance....So that kind of thing, archival research with an aim to making available things that were not available, things that may have been found in libraries or things that were written in a composer's hand that were illegible. So, those are the kinds of projects, I think, that really make a splash with people outside schools of music, theatre, or dance, who can sort of say, yes, this looks like the kind of research that I do in psychology or in sports medicine or whatever. The topics are different, but what the research yields is something familiar: a book, an article, that kind of thing.

Another interviewee associates this familiar approach with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Research Labs, noting, "That's actually how most people would view arts research, and is how the NEA Research Labs utilize it, which is really traditional research *about* the arts in relationship to larger, wicked global problems."

Scholarly books and articles about the arts can be arts research, but they also can be an additional, reflective "meta" layer on top of the research itself, which in some cases is expressed in an arts form (e.g., creative writing, music, theatre, dance, visual art, or digital media). Whereas books and articles are recognizable and legible forms of scholarship across the research enterprise, the interviewee describing the Auschwitz musical scores goes on to state, "Where we run into difficulties sometimes is in trying to make a case for performances as research. Or even

the creation of musical works or dances as research." Here she raises the important idea that arts research can result in a written, verbal analysis, but also in an arts form like a dance, poem, or sculpture. These arts forms can be, for many people, unexpected or unlikely vessels for research.

If an arts form can itself be a research output, then creative practice can be a research method. When creative practice is research, it can serve the same functions of professional advancement and field-building as any other form of research. (Again, not all art and creative practice are research. There are books and plays, musical compositions and dances, paintings and sculptures and digital art whose creators make no claim to doing "research.")

With an arts form as research output, we can see that such research might be disseminated through performances in a theater, exhibitions in a gallery, websites, broadcasts, and many other venues. The reach of these venues far exceeds that of scholarly journals, suggesting arts research's potential for broad impact.

Arts research: Related to other forms of research

To understand *how* art can be research, we might start with the most common definition of research in higher education: *producing new knowledge*[4]. **Understanding a work of art as *producing new knowledge* necessarily builds on our initial idea that the arts are a way of knowing.** When we experience a work of art, we—the listeners, viewers, readers, audience members—may understand something we didn't before, and that new knowledge is co-constructed by us, in those aesthetic, sensorial, and subjective ways. One interviewee articulates that the arts are research because they enable us to think about things in new ways.

Other common understandings of research apply readily to the arts. For example, a choreographer who plumbs the possibilities of improvisation engages in research as *exploration and discovery*[5] just as a biologist observing animal behavior under a microscope or in the field does. Similarly, a visual artist who repeatedly renders the same subject in different materials or colors engages in research as *investigation and making*[6] just as an engineer prototyping and modeling physical mechanisms does.

"By definition, art-making is always a creation of new knowledge....It's one of the things that's so important about having the arts in a research university, because researchers are always facing uncertainty, thinking about a question or an idea they're looking to explore and creating new knowledge from that." –a2ru interviewee

"...all research has some degree of systematicity to it and some degree of creativity to it. What's interesting is to think about in any given research process, where does the systemicity come to the fore and when does the creativity come to the fore? One of the really interesting things about the arts is the role of creativity is relatively constant throughout...[but] creativity is actually involved in *any* research process, and helping those in other sectors think about when they're being creative and when they're being systematic is just an interesting part of a research ecology." –a2ru interviewee

"We have a project right now where an artist is working with women Kurdish resistors, to document and photograph. That would be a form of arts research, illuminating that experience in new ways...There are arts research that parallel what social scientists or others would be doing, but come from the perspective of an artist. The open-endedness of arts research, I think, is one of its hallmarks... I think a journalist, a social scientist, and an artist could all enter into the same research project, and some of them would be [doing] arts research and some of them wouldn't be." –a2ru interviewee

Arts research: A world apart

Pursuing an understanding of arts research in the context of, and in comparison to, more commonly discussed forms of research can be useful, but also can raise expectations that arts research will be uniformly analogous to other research. In fact, **there are many ways that arts research defies comparison with research in medicine, engineering, and natural and social sciences.** Some of these ways are articulated here, with quotations from interviewees.

- Often arts research methods and outcomes have no analogue in other fields.
    - "Performance, recreating a work that exists and performing it, or performing a new work for the very first time, what is the counterpart or the analogue across campus?"
    - "I would say as someone who is in the arts, sometimes it [comparing arts research to other research] seems futile because you're never going to be able to make the comparison. We don't work in labs, and our research goals are sometimes obscure."
- The arts' approach to research can differ from those of other fields.
    - "First, it's this social-cultural interaction, and then, that interaction is complex. It's not a problem-solution model. It's something else that's going on. So in that world of the arts, research isn't going to have a solution to a problem like COVID. It's going to do some sort of different work."
- Conventions and standards for arts research require flexibility to accommodate the range of outputs.
    - "By and large, most scientific articles, there's an abstract, there's an introduction and background and context and literature review framing the history of the question and the challenges, and whether they're technical or theory-based or empirical, there's methodologies, there's results, there's discussions, and there's conclusions. And that's what you get taught and that's how you assess and frame those articles. I don't think that arts research, certainly writing and documentation of that, routinely follows that."
    - "I would say the arts come from fundamentally different ontologies, epistemologies, knowledge systems, and ways of being in the world, that can't be contained. And this is maybe the difficulty, right? When we think about research, what makes research research is that it can be contained. It can be reproducible. And what makes the arts in general...is that it is a multiplicity of things. To borrow a phrase from the Zapatistas, an indigenous group in Mexico, they talked about creating a new world, kind of, where many worlds could exist within a singularity. That's for me, the beauty of arts research. It is that larger space that can account for an array of different ways of being, making, and existing."

- Uncertainty, ambiguity, and subjectivity are hallmarks.
    - With arts research, the response of the experiencer, the user, the person going to the installation or the film is relevant in a way it's not with other forms of research.
    - "Arts research, particularly creative practice, is not a closed controlled system, as opposed to, at the opposite end of that spectrum, a medical study. They're trying to make sure as much as possible is absolutely controlled in order to produce a systematic result. And in the arts I think there's a really fascinating tension between what it is you want to control and what it is that you absolutely want to allow to evolve, or even something far more radical than that."

In addition, it's important to remember that **arts methods can look radically different from methods in other fields.** Some artists play, make a mess, make irrational choices, follow their intuition into blind alleys, tinker, revisit and repeat, or copy and imitate when they are making their art. These, and many other art-making methods, yield artistic results and *can be part of a research process*. Yet they can cause scholars with other disciplinary perspectives to dismiss art-making as frivolous or lacking in rigor. Similarly, some people associate painting pictures, singing, dancing, and writing stories with childhood: this is kids' stuff, not the stuff of scholarship. **We propose that the arts' perspectives, approaches, and practices—that differ so markedly from those of many other fields and disciplines—can make them especially valuable to the research enterprise.**

Arts research: Part of the broader enterprise

When arts research is understood and accepted in the context of a university's entire research enterprise, not only do arts researchers' contributions become recognized as part of a whole but also a productive exchange among researchers opens up.

Several interviewees described what the arts can bring to or teach the broader research enterprise:

- **the opportunity to reconsider and redefine what constitutes research**. "There's this idea that research has to have certain forms and certain structures linked to it that I think comes to us by way of STEMM fields and assumptions of what research is. It has to be reproducible in certain ways. It has to create new knowledge. It has to be, at least within higher ed, it has to be distributed using certain means of distribution, peer reviewed articles or peer review as a process. I think those are all crucial, but I think that what's exciting about arts research, it allows us to actually reconsider some of those embedded assumptions we have about what is research, what are research outputs?"
- **the contribution of creative tools for research broadly**. "The arts wind up at the bottom of the [university] hierarchy, but I would argue that has left research without some really interesting tools around creativity that could be better deployed."
- **a model of doing research in conversation with the public**. "One of the amazing things about arts research is we do so much of our research in public, for the public, and with the public, and I think that is something that the rest of the research enterprise doesn't get to do as much. It's a really exciting part of arts research that a lot of folks in the humanities and social sciences and sciences could learn a lot from."

- **an acknowledgement of the questioning nature of research, as opposed to only celebrating research that is "successful" by providing answers.** "I think in arts research, particularly in creative practice, surprise is welcome. Uncertainty is built into the process; it's not a trip from uncertain to certain, which I think is a common pathway in the sciences."
- **a resourcefulness and capacity for doing a lot with only minimal support**. "People need to recognize that...we do a lot of research on a shoestring budget and are quite dependent on internal sources largely, and a very few external ones. And yet we continue to do it. And we continue to do it at high quality and in great quantities as well."

Arts research beyond arts-designated units

Despite the fact that some researchers in other fields have a hard time thinking of art as research, **arts research happens beyond arts-designated units–in health sciences, social work, and engineering, to name a few**. Consistent with the multiplicity inherent in arts research generally, this work looks different wherever it appears. One interviewee notes, "Some people are using arts methods towards not necessarily arts-oriented aims."

There is a balancing act between policing who can and can't do arts research on the one hand, and saying that anyone can do it on the other. Considering what training, methods, and approaches a scholar uses becomes more important than easy labels. One interviewee says, "I really want us to move away from 'there are arts people and there are non-arts people,'... That distinction is less useful. It's useful that they've really been deeply engaged in [arts-based] modes of research their whole career."

However, another interviewee also emphasizes the importance of training: "There is an assumption that individuals not trained in the arts can easily make that shift into arts research...there are scholars who will make that move into arts research in ways that wouldn't be acceptable inversely." That interviewee continues, "We live in a society where many people think that you can write something and just distribute it, but there's still a rule for professionalized journalists, and people who do this work. And I'd say maybe there's some parallels in the arts. Why are the arts something we think everybody can do?"

Arts-integrated research

"Arts-integrated research" is the term a2ru uses for interdisciplinary research that includes both arts and non-arts disciplines. **Truly arts-integrated research includes the arts as an equal partner from the earliest stages and is a genuine exchange and collaboration across disciplines.** Like any other collaborators, artists are involved because the shared topic aligns with their research interests, and the collaborative project enables them to explore those interests in new ways.

This model stands in opposition to, for example, a medical research team engaging a visual or theatre artist at the end of their research process to communicate results, or an artist who takes inspiration from scientific or other disciplinary content. While both of these situations can yield

valuable and interesting results, we don't consider them collaborative, interdisciplinary, arts-integrated research.

Arts-integrated research is an opportunity to leverage the arts' ways of knowing and approaches in team science and convergence research. It is also an opportunity for all collaborating researchers—artists and others—to enrich their own research through interdisciplinary exchange.

Collaboration across disciplinary difference takes longer, is more complicated, has a higher potential for conflict, and often needs support for facilitation, communication, and administration. However, there is a body of research that shows that interdisciplinary groups are better problem-solvers because of their diverse perspectives and approaches[7], and that they are more likely to have novel outcomes[8]. **At a2ru, we see that both the challenges and advantages associated with interdisciplinary research are compounded when the arts are in the mix; where there is a great disciplinary distance among collaborators, there are fewer shared assumptions, posing greater challenges to communication but also broadening the range of perspectives on the topic.**

We envision an arts-inclusive research scenario where, as one interviewee described, "...anybody on campus would be starting something [interdisciplinary team research project] and would be like, 'You know, we haven't found the artists that we're going to work with yet,' in the same way that someone might say, 'Well, we haven't gotten a good statistician on board.'"

Arts research: Assessment

One interviewee notes, "I would caution us against using certain metrics that come to us from other fields. I think they limit our understanding of what can be contained within something as open-ended as arts research."

Indeed, many faculty and academic leaders have struggled to assess and articulate the impact of their arts activities for research, community engagement, and social transformation. Familiar metrics for research assessment such as citation indices and funding dollars have proven a poor fit with the arts.

As of 2025, this is an ongoing and urgent effort of the a2ru network and its allies: to illustrate the significant impact of the research and practice of artists in higher education, helping faculty make the impact of their work visible for annual reviews, tenure, and promotion, and helping arts units to show impact and advocate for resources. **By exploring cross-institutional and finely-grained scholarly output patterns, we hope to establish flexible, trackable, and quantifiable impact metrics for the arts.**

2. Supporting arts research in your university

The benefits of a thriving arts research culture include:

- increased research impact
- increased visibility and legibility for arts research, and the arts broadly, on campus
- support and validation for faculty arts researchers

Arts research thrives at institutions that:

- put structures into place that support arts research and arts-integrated research
- cultivate leaders who actively promote those structures
- provide funding and administrative support for arts research and arts-integrated research
- communicate their support for arts research internally and publicly

Structures

"Structures" in this case refers to institutional roles, policies, and processes. When these structures don't support arts research—for example, when language in Tenure and Promotion policy or in internal funding calls assumes all research is STEMM-based and doesn't speak to arts contexts—they create systemic challenges for arts research. Conversely, **when institutional structures are set up with arts research, and indeed a range of ways of knowing, in mind, then the entire academic community can flourish and extend its impact.**

Even more, institutions with a reputation for recognizing and supporting these diverse ways of knowing attract diverse faculty and students.

Tenure and promotion

Tenure and promotion (T/P) policy fulfills an important dual purpose; it reifies an institution's values even as it incentivizes and supports the work that a university deems valuable. Since arts research and arts-integrated research share a universe of concerns with fields such as interdisciplinary practice, digital humanities, and public scholarship, T/P policy that recognizes a range of scholarly outputs benefits many faculty.

Refine definitions

Across disciplines, there exist numerous usages of terms like *research*, *creativity, engagement,* and *practice*. Once the combinations and permutations of these modes of scholarship have been surfaced, institutional definitions can be updated to accommodate traditional disciplinary endeavors as well as arts research and arts-integrative research. The process requires time and attention; one member of a committee charged with T/P policy revision explained "We had to spend quite a few faculty retreats and faculty meetings explaining to one another what the criteria were and recalibrating our understanding to allow for all of it, and to give each thing its due measure so that we didn't hold anyone up to something that didn't make any sense and we didn't inhibit anyone, but rather we encouraged everyone to embrace as much of everything." **The idea of *continuum*—a continuum of scholarship from disciplinary to interdisciplinary**

and across levels of arts-integration, a continuum of scholarly and creative artifacts, and a continuum of professional trajectories—can help guide the process of crafting inclusive and supportive T/P policy.

Make explicit

It is important to chart T/P policy that reflects the university's values around arts research and arts-integrative research. **Faculty and administrators alike need clear, explicit guidelines that account for procedures, criteria, and body of evidence—what "counts" and how it is presented and executed to maximize success.** Such a map helps faculty (and their mentors) track their journey from the time of hire, ensuring that terms and expectations are consistent throughout.

Leadership roles

At the highest organizational levels, establish arts roles on par with an institution's other leadership roles. Arts leadership roles that parallel those in familiar health or sustainability arenas help make arts research legible across campus, signalling the importance of the arts to the entire university. And leaders in roles like Associate Vice Provost for the Arts can be a voice for arts research at the institutional level.

In arts or arts-adjacent schools and colleges, establish a person who leads research for that unit—for example, a Director of Research and Creative Practice. This person supports arts research in the unit, assisting faculty with identifying and applying for funding, advocating for their work, and navigating university and external processes. Any person in such a role must recognize that in arts units, some faculty define their work solely as creative practice and reject the role of researcher. Their job is not to coerce, but to support faculty work however they can.

Funding

There are expenses associated with arts research as with any other research: space, materials, course release, travel, graduate assistants, and more. Across the university, however, there is often limited understanding of arts research needs and their associated expenses, and of the extreme scarcity of funds for the arts. One associate dean for research in the arts who has collaborated extensively with engineering and medical researchers commented on the shock that a STEMM researcher would feel if asked to work under conditions that most artists, including those in the university, are accustomed to:

> The lack of federal funding in this country for arts research— it's very hard for people to comprehend what that means. It means there are *no labs. None!* It means there are no PhD students. It means there are very few materials. It's like no, there's no test tubes. Of course you haven't got that microscope. Or yes, you have, but you're paying for it out of your own salary. I completely get why they're [these circumstances] not understood, because they're beyond the lived experience of most scientists. They can't imagine that.

There are some external funding sources for the arts from government, foundation, and corporate sources. However, **most funders support the creation of arts for public display or performance; relatively few funders support *arts research*.** The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) largely supports artistic practice, but it does have a dedicated research arm with

moneys available. NEA research grants are fairly traditional in their understanding of arts research, generally funding research *about* the arts with, for example, social science methodologies and a written narrative outcome. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and a few private funders such as the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) also support similar research about the arts.

Internal funding

Given the scarcity of external funding for arts research, **it's important to create internal funding sources for arts research**. In addition, some internal seed and dissemination grants are appropriate for arts research although they aren't "branded" or designated for the arts explicitly; support faculty arts researchers in identifying and applying for such grants that may align with their research.

Interdisciplinary initiatives

University-driven collaborative research opportunities that welcome and accommodate arts-integrated research not only support arts research itself; they also leverage unique arts-based practices and approaches to improve the impact of collaborative research, and set the institution up to meet federal calls for convergent research. Importantly, **universities that truly support arts researchers' participation in their interdisciplinary initiatives begin to dispel common understandings of the arts as purely decorative, and of arts approaches and practices as irrelevant to global problem-solving**.

Many university interdisciplinary granting programs are aimed at large-scale center grants, which are usually given out by NSF, NIH, and other STEMM-focused organizations. These contexts often lead to support for social, scientific, or medical research—not "home turf" for many arts faculty in creative writing, digital media, art, design, music, theatre, or dance. As such, arts researchers might not readily see how they could contribute to research in these topics, or fit into an interdisciplinary team.

Proactive measures to more intentionally bring the arts on board include actively and explicitly including the arts among the expertise sought, describing research topics in a way that signals how the arts might have a relevant voice in these interdisciplinary conversations, and providing clear pathways for arts research participation. Given the sometimes radical differences in methodologies, approaches, and outcomes, many interdisciplinary teams that include both STEMM and arts researchers benefit from facilitation and administrative support.

Non-monetary support

Funding is not the only support needed for arts research. For example: Have RFP's been disseminated in such a way that eligible faculty are aware of them? Do all faculty get the help they may need to submit an application? Do arts-integrated research teams whose members come from disciplinarily distant schools and colleges get administrative and facilitation support? These forms of support point back to structures—processes for communication and dissemination, and dedicated roles to support arts researchers and their work.

Cultivating arts leadership

Establish leaders who understand arts research and arts-integrated research, and can work for and with arts researchers.

One arts dean describes how she felt formerly at campuswide associate deans' meetings "...we were at the dance, but were never asked. We were sort of sitting off on the side and watching...Sometimes what they were talking about was just so, so distant from anything that I would be thinking about or anything that is reflected in the work that's done at [my unit]."

In contrast, that dean notes that new leadership at her institution's Office of Research has keen insight into the arts and is particularly adept at including arts deans in new ways—for example, including creative practice in communications and programs.

Communication

Develop a shared definition of arts research to ensure clear communication, both internally and externally. Use terms that are true to the people doing the work and the culture of the university, whether that be artistic research, arts-based research, research/creative practice, or something else.

Celebrate arts research at high levels, recognizing it in the same ways and places as other types of research, e.g., on the university website home page, in newsletters and announcements.

First person: Arts researcher interview

Arts researchers' work is present on campus as installations, performances, exhibits, and more. Rather than showing the *breadth* of arts research with dozens of examples, here we attempt to show its *depth* through an interview with arts researcher Catie Newell. This interview was edited for clarity and length.

Catie Newell is a professor of architecture at the University of Michigan (U-M). She and Upali Nanda, clinical professor of architecture at U-M, are recipients of a 2024 Arts Research: Incubation & Acceleration (ARIA) grant for their project *Inhabiting Light* at Nichols Arboretum on the U-M campus. a2ru staff spoke with Newell about her arts research.

On *Inhabiting Light* and her work in general

If I zoom out, an interest in light and darkness brackets everything I do. I came up through academia in the discipline of architecture, but I think I've operated on the fringes of that discipline and fit more into art world. My own personal practice has to do with installation, remaking existing spaces—you can think of it as architectural reconfiguration, or as sculptural.

With *Inhabiting Light,* we got lucky in that Nichols Arboretum wanted to partner. They brought the idea to place the work in the magnolia glade, which is a space to mourn and grieve. So the project has been designed with a sense of care, to take care of people. Working with the Arb and C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, they wanted a space where people can sit by themselves, or sit

with a family member, and have the opportunity to come back again and again. How do we make a spot that feels really private, even though it's outdoors and public? How do we also accommodate, say, four people who are all strangers?

Our team designed glass geodes with eight or ten sides and an internal void, and they aggregate together to create a space that is within the grove of magnolias. It can be read in a way as a shared bench, with nooks and spaces to sit quietly and privately if desired. Someone can sit within the Inhabiting Light space and be optically obstructed; it has a level of privacy, but it is also not opaque walls. And the glass works as a tesselated geometric module, taking in the light and colors of the surroundings, reflecting and refracting.

Working in this space was a beautiful way to give deeper meaning to my work that is material-based and architectural and aesthetic.

On what she calls her work

"Research" and "practice": both. Thinking about arts research, all my research has an arts ambition underneath it, even if I don't say that word.

On whether she has a research question

I don't have a question in a way that looks like a hypothesis, something you would imagine for some of the national level foundation grants. In a way, the framing of my research has more to do with values than a question. What's its (this thing I'm making) reason for being? It has more of an impact than something that's super practical or logistical; it's an emotional or inspirational impact.

On the research process

I go through every bit of research knowing there are multiple answers—this is a way, this is another way. Often when I'm working on a project, there's a moment that I discover something unexpected, and it becomes the spark for the next project.When I reflect on a project, it's always teaching me something more: *oh, I want to work with this part of it now*.

I attribute this to taking a lot of photographs. I photograph all my process and the work when it's done, and this leads to a new place. I can't draw light and darkness, so I had to capture it with photos. Photos are a constant reflection and new way of seeing because camera frames things differently. Photographing my work generates new ideas, even though photographing wasn't the goal. It's a sketchbook that's talking to me. When I'm stuck or burnt out, I go photograph things—it's a joy and a way to figure out things.

On funding for arts research

The way a lot of funding is set up—with grants and research and who gets the money and do you need a PhD—some colleagues frame their work as research into specific topics intended to appease the demands of grants that are out there. To get the funding you need, it changes how you talk about it and what the deliverables are. Sometimes it's slightly off from the true impact of the work, just so it can get funded. This can really take a lot of energy away from the work, and expend time trying to fulfill the criteria that has been set by others.

On the PhD

It can be truly frustrating when a grant locks you into requirements that assume research can only come from the route of taking on a PhD. That's a very locked-down definition of what knowledge could come from. My research is not just on a whim, or self-expression; it's a conscious way of stepping back and constantly asking questions about the world around us.

On who arts research is for

I took some extended family to see one of my installations. They didn't get into it at all, and they didn't know how to talk about it; they were almost frozen in space. That really impacted me. It's on us who make it to figure out how each project can impact more people. For arts research, it would help for viewers to have more information. It's on society too, to teach people how to value and understand art. But I'm okay knowing that not everyone is going to get every single project, but being in a place where it is valued and discussed is key.

Sample of Catie Newell's research. (Photo: Light Forms team, 2024)

Endnotes

[1] For an explanation of the concept of disciplinary distance, see Julie Thompson Klein, "A Taxonomy of Interdisciplinarity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Robert Frodeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15-30.
[2] Alan S. Brown and Jennifer L. Novak, *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance* (San Francisco, CA: WolfBrown, 2007).
[3] Gabriel Harp, *What Is Arts Research?* (Ann Arbor: Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities, 2018), 24, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11560992
[4] Gabriel Harp, *What Is Research?* (Ann Arbor: Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities, 2018), 5, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11560291
[5] Harp, What Is Research?, 18.
[6] Harp, What Is Research?, 22.
[7] See, for example, Lu Hong and Scott E. Page. 2004. "Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 101 (46): 16385–89. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0403723101.
[8] See, for example, Caroline S. Wagner, J. David Roessner, Katy Bobb, Julie T. Klein, Kevin W. Boyack, Joann Keyton, Ismael Rafols, and Katy Börner. 2011. "Approaches to Understanding and Measuring Interdisciplinary Scientific Research (IDR): A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Informetrics* 5 (1): 14–26. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2010.06.004