

GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

## INFORMATION OVERLOAD

*Claire Bishop on the superabundance of research-based art*

Claire Bishop



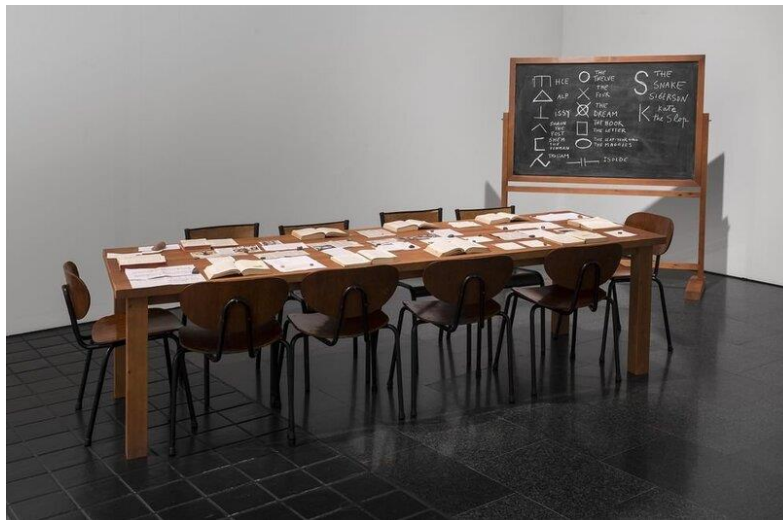
*View of "Wolfgang Tillmans: truth study center," 2005, Maureen Paley, London.*

POSTCARDS, FAXES, AND EMAIL PRINTOUTS lie wanly in a vitrine. A plywood shelving unit holds rows of informational leaflets. One gallery wall is plastered with graphs and charts. Another is covered in hundreds of seemingly identical photographs. On a bank of video monitors, talking heads are explaining something. In a darkened corner, a slide projector clunks slowly through a carousel of images. Nearby, a 16-mm film whirs alongside a soporific voice-over. An illuminated table is covered in papers and newspaper clippings marked up with Post-its. Every object on display is accompanied by a lengthy explanatory caption written by the artist, also available as a pamphlet.

If any of this sounds familiar, you've been in the presence of research-based art. Although the elements vary, the genre is characterized by a reliance on text and discourse to support an abundance of materials, distributed spatially. The horizontal axis (vitrines, tables) tends to be privileged over the vertical, and the overall structure is additive rather than distilled, obeying a logic of more is more. Whenever I encounter one of these installations, I start to experience a feeling of mild panic: *How much time is it going to take to wade through this?*

Rarely do I experience surprise. Today, research-based art is nothing novel; its presence is almost mandatory in any serious exhibition. But it has never been clearly defined—or, for that matter, critiqued. It has much in common with other trends that have arisen since the 1990s, such as the artist-curated exhibition and the “archival turn,” but it is not fully congruent with either.<sup>1</sup>

The chief antecedents of research-based art are not difficult to identify: photodocumentary captioning in the tradition of Lewis Hine; the film essay as defined by Hans Richter and practiced by auteurs ranging from Chris Marker to Harun Farocki; and the interdisciplinary Conceptualism of artists like Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, and Hans Haacke (who in the '70s engaged with psychoanalysis, anthropology, and sociology, respectively). That said, changes in art education have arguably been a more decisive influence than any of these forebears. Although research-based art is a global phenomenon, it is inseparable from the rise of doctoral programs for artists in the West, specifically in Europe, in the early '90s. According to a 2012 survey conducted by art historian James Elkins, seventy-three institutions in Europe offered Ph.D.s in studio art, forty-two of which were in the UK alone—striking statistics when compared with the five in Canada, seven in the US, and four in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Unlike master-of-fine-arts degrees (the usual higher-education qualification for artists), doctoral programs generally expect that artistic practice be supplemented by written research—either as a separate but related dissertation or made legible within the artwork itself. While some of the artists I discuss later were born outside the West, they have all passed through art schools in Europe or North America. Even if they don't have doctorates, the intellectual milieu of these programs informs their work, along with the broader conscription of education to neoliberal systems of value (such as “return on investment” and “measurable impact”).



*Dora Garcia, Exhausted Books, 2002, mixed media. Installation view, MACBA, Barcelona, 2015.*

There are many reasons to be skeptical of the Ph.D.-in-fine-art boom. One is that it exacerbates hierarchies of economic privilege already endemic to art education. Another is that art, under the pressure of academicization, becomes tame, systematic, and professional. For artist Hito Steyerl, “artistic research” has even become a new discipline, one that normalizes, regulates, and ensures the repetition of protocols.<sup>3</sup> Yet as Elkins points out, very few influential texts or manifestos by artists of the past would ever have earned their writers a doctorate, because some of the best writing by artists has been dogmatic and impulsive rather than laboriously researched and peer-reviewed.

My own focus is not on the neoliberal university context, since this has been much discussed already, along with the attempt to analyze artistic research—a broader historical category of which I take research-based art to be a recent subset—in terms of knowledge production and epistemology.<sup>4</sup> Nor do I want to recap the longer history of postwar art education—the shift, identified by art historian Howard Singerman, from artisanal training in technical skills to more discursive forms of practice.<sup>5</sup> Nor do I look at moving-image work (whose lineage has been well charted by Steyerl), even though it shares many of the same concerns as the practices discussed in this essay.

Instead, my goal is to analyze the *forms* that artistic research takes, the type of *knowledge* that artists produce, and how the viewer *attends* to the information that has been assembled. My point is that research-based installation art—its techniques of display, its accumulation and spatialization of information, its model of research, its construction of a viewing subject, and its relationship to knowledge and truth—cannot be understood in isolation from contemporaneous developments in digital technology.



*Renée Green, Import/Export Funk Office, 1992–93, mixed media, metal shelf structure, books, magazines, newspapers, ephemera, BETA video cases, twenty-five hours of digitized video, two monitors, one video projection, cassette cases, sound, acrylic signs, four wooden structures, acrylic signs on four shelves, four cassette players, thirty wooden plaques with rubber-stamped text. Installation view, Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, 1992. Photo: Andrea Stappert.*

RENÉE GREEN'S INSTALLATION *Import/Export Funk Office*, 1992–93, exemplifies the introduction of research-based art as a new hybrid category in the early '90s.<sup>6</sup> Thematically, it explores African diasporic culture, bohemia, and subculture. Formally, it comprises metal shelving units filled with books, magazines, and photographs borrowed from the German critic Diedrich Diederichsen, who was also extensively interviewed for the project. Green's video recordings total more than twenty-six hours and can be consulted by viewers, as can her audio recordings and reading materials. *Import/Export* marks a rupture with preceding modes of artistic research by inviting the viewer to be a *user*, someone who can explore the fragments, synthesize them, and potentially even mobilize the material for his or her own research (or at least perform that role—notice the white gloves placed on top of a box marked DATA). In 1995, Green

launched a version of the work as a CD-ROM, arguing that her research could be more easily consumed via digital hyperlinks than in a gallery where viewers never seem to have enough time.

Created before use of the internet was widespread, *Import/Export* points to a distributed model of knowledge that has since become the norm. Rather than deploying an authorial voice to publicize information (as had Haacke), Green suggests that knowledge is networked, collaborative, and in process. Significantly, her model is not the internet but *hypertext*: a form of nonsequential writing based on links between verbal and visual information that went on to become the key structural protocol of the internet. Permitting readers to navigate their own paths through masses of information, hypertext was heralded by literary critics like George Landow as a realization of poststructuralist theories of authorship, a virtual instantiation of Deleuze and Guattari's centerless rhizome.<sup>7</sup> In an essay reflecting on the *Import/Export* CD-ROM, Green approvingly quotes Landow: "Quantity removes mastery and authority, for one can only sample, not master, a text."<sup>8</sup> Back in 1993, Green described her strategy as deliberately avoiding a simple takeaway: The installation "mocks didacticism," she wrote, and demonstrates "the complexity of things" rather than making "any one kind of authoritative statement about the way things are."<sup>9</sup>

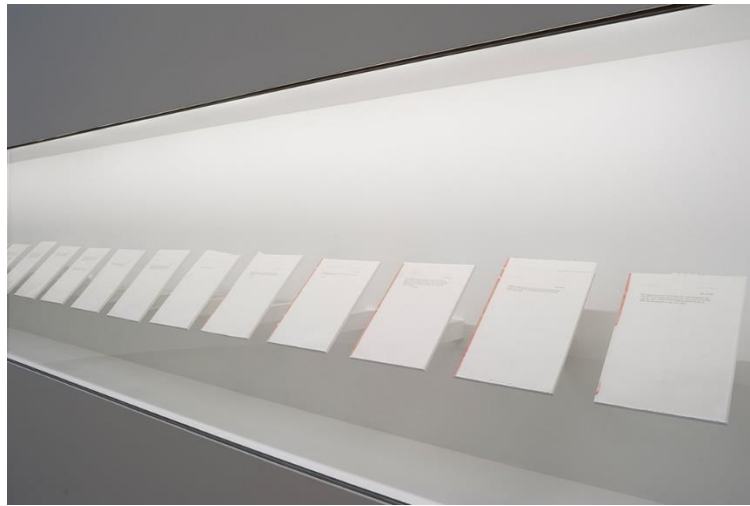
### **Many of these pieces convey a sense of being immersed—even lost—in data.**

In addition to Green, other pioneers of research-based art include interdisciplinary collectives like the Center for Land Use Interpretation (Los Angeles, formed in 1994), MAP Office (Hong Kong, 1996), and Multiplicity (Milan, 2000) and a previous generation of artists such as Antoni Muntadas (Spain, born in 1942). These first-phase artists undertook their own primary investigations of various topics, often in the form of interviews, critical mapping, or digital archives. Treating research as a public resource, they disseminated their fieldwork on new media interfaces including interactive monitors and websites, transposing materials from walls to shelves and tables, where they could be read in any order, creating multidirectional audiovisual environments that pointedly refrained from directing readers along a particular path or providing an overarching narrative.<sup>10</sup>

It's important to stress that for Green and her generation, this aversion to authorial mastery was a response not just to poststructuralism but also to feminist and postcolonial theory, which variously critiqued linear history as evolutionary, univocal, masculinist, and imperial. To a degree, this rejection of mastery can be seen as a particularly North American response to French theory: In academia and art schools, poststructuralist antifoundationalism (including the "death of the author") was shifted onto the category of *identity* as the new basis for critique. The situatedness of the authorial subject, manifest as a sensitivity for stating the artist's own "positionality," came to assume a new importance. The Whitney Independent Study Program became the leading incubator of such work, exposing students to seminars that fused aspects of Derridean *différance* and Lyotard's end of grand narratives with Frankfurt School critical theory, feminism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism.

When the rejection of linear argumentation and an authorial voice converged with a restructuring of information and the promise of a collectivized knowledge through new digital technologies, a decisive reorganization of artistic form was accomplished. Spatialized and networked, information floated free of the seriality that had dominated art of the '60s and '70s. Consciously or unconsciously, these new theoretical horizons led to a post-hermeneutic position—in other words, to hesitation over forceful interpretation. A project was said to "ask questions about" or "draw attention to" a topic, without any obligation to formulate conclusions or provide an easily

digestible message. With hindsight, we can see that the nonlinearity of digital hypertext and poststructuralism cut two ways: On the one hand, it helped to dismantle master narratives; on the other, it produced an excess of information that was difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully grasp.



*Mario García Torres, Share-e-Nau Wanderings (A Film Treatment), 2006, thermo paper, nineteen sheets. Installation view, Künstlerhaus Halle für Kunst & Medien, Graz, Austria, 2014.*

THE SECOND PHASE of research-based art overlaps chronologically with the first but is characterized by an inverse relationship to new technology, a rejection of digital media, and a fascination with the obsolete and the analog: 35-mm slides, celluloid film, record players, and the like. The turn to dead tech in the mid-to-late '90s was accompanied by another unexpected regression—toward narrative. In works by this cohort—Matthew Buckingham, Tacita Dean, Mario García Torres, Danh Vo, and others—information confronts the viewer in fragmentary arrays, but the rhizomatic structure is reined in by a more conventional mode of storytelling that, while often highly elliptical and subjective, does *not* invite viewers to choose their own adventure. Instead, elements are presented in particular sequences (a row of captioned images, a series of slides, a film with a narrated soundtrack). The seriality that dominated the art of the '60s and '70s stages a partial return. A theoretically informed refusal of master narratives is replaced by a desire to show the multiple ways in which individual micronarratives—sometimes fictional, as in many of García Torres's works—jostle and intersect with history.<sup>11</sup> The self becomes a glue that enables the debris of the past to stick together, at least temporarily.

Art historian Hal Foster took a psychoanalytic approach to this tendency in a 2004 essay, describing research-based art as having an “archival impulse”: The artist demonstrates a will to “connect what cannot be connected,” akin to the paranoid’s ability to make connections among disparate points, always with him- or herself at the center.<sup>12</sup> Foster refers to the internet, but primarily to oppose its interface to the tactility of archival art; he doesn’t mention that, in fact, the internet is the technological enabler of this art’s connectionist mentality.

I would thus revise Foster’s argument: The links made by artists are less the result of an unconscious pathological response to social conditions (in Foster’s telling, a will to relate in a time of disconnected social order) than an effect of internalizing the apparatus through which their research is increasingly conducted. The attitude can be glimpsed in the following observations by García Torres:

Obviously [the internet] is always my first point of contact with a subject and many times it leads me to investigate things in a less methodological way, a richer way. It situates normal people,

everyday people, at the same level as books and official sources. [The] internet is present all the time, and I don't blame it for often being wrong. I like it. What better way to divert an investigation towards something contradictory or further from the truth. It is there that one finds relations that potentially become something interesting.<sup>13</sup>

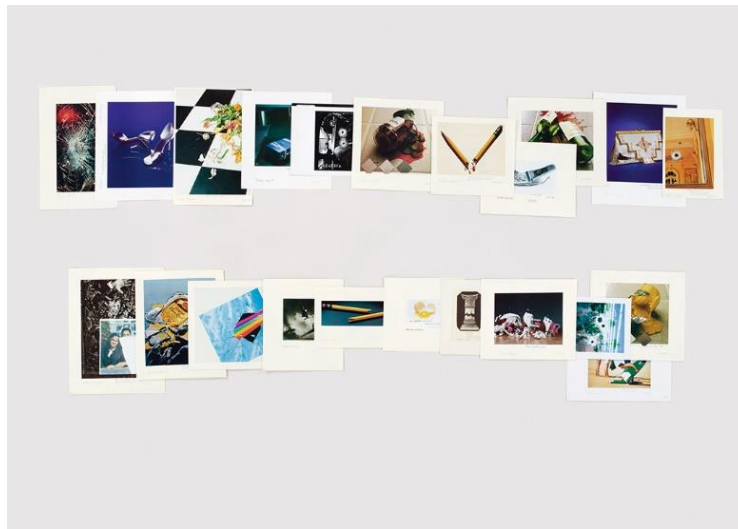
In other words, the internet liberates the artist-researcher from academic protocols, and a different type of research becomes possible and validated—a line of thinking governed by drift rather than depth, creative inaccuracy rather than expertise, and accessibility rather than the ivory tower. Nicolas Bourriaud's term *semionaut* might be the best description of this approach: Drifting from signifier to signifier, the artist invents meandering trajectories between cultural signs.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the first phase, which used a digital logic (the hyperlink) to structure the presentation of primary research, in this second phase a digital *dérive* is presented as an analog display. The cold uniformity of the plasma screen is discarded in favor of a more auratic interface and array of objects. Foster's will to "connect what cannot be connected" is less a paranoid symptom than a definition of surfing, updating a trajectory of chance encounters that can be traced from the nineteenth-century flaneur to Surrealism to the Situationists—but now with a technological substrate in place of the unconscious.

**For fabulation to have critical currency, it matters which histories are being retrieved and why.**

The second phase of research-based art pries open a gap between *research* and *truth*: Rather than being grounded in social themes (migration, translation, female labor, environmental damage), the artwork pulls disparate strands together through fiction and subjective speculation. García Torres has made such "subjective" works about artists including Vito Acconci, Martin Kippenberger, and Robert Rauschenberg. Similar pantheons can be found in the work of Sam Durant (in pieces referencing Robert Smithson and the Case Study Houses) and Jonathan Monk (who has built a career out of recasting canonical male artists from the '60s onward). Here, artistic research opens avenues overlooked by hegemonic historical narratives but tends to shore up a canon of white male protagonists, effectively consolidating received history rather than contesting it.

Compare this with the most powerful and radical engagement with micronarrative during the same period, Saidiya Hartman's method of "critical fabulation." Her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts" wrestles with the necessity of invention, and the ethical obligations of the researcher, in the face of an archive's limitations, exclusions, and deletions.<sup>15</sup> The gap, in her case, concerns the lives of two young women who did not survive the Middle Passage, and the fraught question of how to grant them historical visibility. For fabulation to have critical currency, it matters which histories are being retrieved and why.





Taryn Simon, *Folder: Broken Objects*, 2012, ink-jet print, framed 47 × 62". From the series "The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection," 2013.

THE THIRD PHASE of research-based art can be characterized as fully post-internet, by which I mean not an embrace of or a reaction to but a complete inhabitation of digital logic. It abandons the desire to find connections among links, turning instead toward what art historian David Joselit has described as "aggregation": the selection and configuration of relatively autonomous elements that may signify disparate values or epistemologies.<sup>16</sup> Joselit argues that aggregation captures the asynchrony of globalization while also reflecting an "epistemology of search": In his words, "What matters more in our contemporary digital world is not making content, but configuring it, searching for it, finding what you need and making meaning from it."<sup>17</sup> Artists no longer undertake their own research but download, assemble, and recontextualize existing materials in a desultory updating of appropriation and the readymade.

What results is a conflation: *Search* becomes *research*. The difference is subtle but important. Searching is the preliminary stage of looking for something via a search engine, "Googling." Research proper involves analysis, evaluation, and a new way of approaching a problem. Search involves the adaptation of one's ideas to the language of "search terms"—preexisting concepts most likely to throw up results—whereas research (both online and offline) involves asking fresh questions and elaborating new terminologies yet to be recognized by the algorithm.

One manifestation of aggregative search-as-research is the propensity to show preexisting image archives, as in Akram Zaatari's re-presentation of Hashem el Madani's studio portraiture (*Objects of Study/Studio Practices*, 2007) or Taryn Simon's photographs of folders from the New York Public Library ("The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection," 2013). Other artists aggregate particular types of images: Zoe Leonard's collection of several thousand postcards of Niagara Falls (*You see I am here after all*, 2008), or Maryam Jafri's ongoing compilation of photographs of postcolonial celebration (*Independence Day 1934–1975*, 2009–), both of which are arranged upon the wall in grids that evoke a half-loaded page of image-search results.



Henrik Olesen, *Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists relevant to Homo-Social Culture V/ American Male Bodies/English Lads/Melancholy*, 2007, collage, ink-jet prints on board, 4' 7 1/8" × 19' 8 1/4".

It's rare to find artists who impose an original framework onto aggregation. *Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists Relevant to Homo-Social Culture Born between c. 1300–1870*, 2007, by Danish artist Henrik Olesen, is one refreshing example. Olesen (mis)reads art history through a blatantly anachronistic queer lens, organizing digital copies of paintings and prints and excerpts of preexisting scholarship into themes like “Lesbian Visibility,” “Some Faggy Gestures,” and “Anal Sex in England.” The result is a romp through art history that uses accumulation and juxtaposition to reread works like Gustave Caillebotte’s plain air paintings of men, now slyly recategorized as “cruising.”

More typical, however, is the open-ended aggregation of German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans’s “Truth Study Center,” 2005–. The installation changes from exhibition to exhibition but always consists of slim wooden tables (originally twenty-four, sometimes as many as thirty-seven) on which are displayed articles, ephemera, the occasional photo by Tillmans, and texts that locate the present moment in relation to a historical event (e.g., “Now 1993 is as long ago as the Civil Rights Act was in 1993”). An online visualizer of a 2017 version of one table is hosted on the Tate website, which enables the viewer to zoom in and peruse its content.<sup>18</sup> Cuttings from newspapers—primarily liberal-left ones like *The Guardian*—and scientific journals sit next to photographs of nature, abstract forms made by running a blank sheet through a printer, and an empty packet of potato chips. In an earnest voice-over, Tillmans elucidates connections among the items that would otherwise be difficult to grasp and makes the oft-repeated point that nowadays we can pick news sources that tell us what we want to hear.

In a telling shift from research installations of the early '90s, Tillmans’s commentary invokes research as a matter of “authority” and “truth.” The poststructuralist project to dismantle these terms was completely blindsided by the rise of truthiness and fake news. Accordingly, the “free library” aesthetic of the first phase of research-based art has been replaced by a more careful, even precious approach to composition. In “Truth Study Center,” we can only read the information through glass, not handle it. The formalism of the artist’s arrangement implies that there *are* connections to grasp among the materials—that the truth is out there. But because the arrangements aren’t linear, taxonomic, or particularly distinctive, the materials in each vitrine form the visual analogue of a word cloud, conveying a general impression rather than a set of specific relationships.<sup>19</sup> In a 2022 review of Tillmans’s installation at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Peter Schjeldahl confessed to “only quickly scanning the complicated table works, which smartly anticipated today’s torrent of information via institutional and social media—and its numbing effect.”<sup>20</sup>

“Truth Study Center” reflects on post-truth and the end of an authoritative news media but equally seems to be a symptom of this demise. Each table is effectively a material reformatting of an internet search: The links among the items on display seem to be a conflation of subjective



curiosity and the algorithmic. The sheer quantity of tables, each containing twenty or so items, promotes a type of rapid reading familiar to us from online browsing. Because of this, and the work's instability of content—"refreshed" for every exhibition—"Truth Study Center" seems to inhabit a post-internet consciousness.



*View of "Wolfgang Tillmans: truth study center," 2005, Maureen Paley, London.*

EACH PHASE of research-based art presents a different understanding of what constitutes knowledge and a different approach to spectatorial labor. In the first phase, the artist invites the viewer to piece together parts from the materials provided to form their own historical narrative and to experience in their bodies and minds the complexity of a given (usually counterhegemonic) topic. Knowledge aspires to be new knowledge. In the second phase, the viewer listens to or reads a narrative crafted by the artist. Facts may be partly fictionalized, but there remains a sense of correcting or enhancing history, often through a counter- or micro-narrative. The third phase returns the viewer to sifting through information, albeit now in a formal, less interactive mode. Knowledge is the aggregation of preexisting data, and the work accordingly invites meta-reflection on the production of knowledge as truth. In each case, though, despite creating the look or *atmosphere* of research, artists are reluctant to draw conclusions. Many of these pieces convey a sense of being immersed—even lost—in data.

The trajectory of research-based art thus tracks and illuminates a subtle restructuring of what constitutes knowledge and how we should attend to it. As audience members, we have felt the difficulty of seeing ever larger exhibitions since the biennial boom of the '90s. The need for attention triage in such exhibitions became endemic after the turn of the millennium. Documenta 11, in 2002, famously included more than six hundred hours of video, which viewers could see only if they stayed for the full length of the hundred-day exhibition. Of course, the larger context for such visual saturation lies beyond exhibition culture. The pressure placed upon the human capacity to digest information is an inevitable outcome of the "attention economy," in which businesses compete for consumers' consideration, as measured by clicks on pop-ups, sponsored posts, personalized offers, etc.

**The stakes have changed. Some formal strategies might need to be rethought.**

My concern here is less with the ethics of unsolicited advertising than with the visual and semiotic interference to which we have become habituated and the perceptual routines that have formed and hardened in response. I have learned to recognize and scroll past interruptions. Block it out, resume reading, scroll down, repeat. I have developed new forms of focus, from the

selective blinkering of vision (being able to read a text despite the flashing banner next to it) to enhanced peripheral attention (reading my phone while walking down the street). I have trained myself to switch quickly among focal points and to recover more rapidly after interruptions. At times, this shuttling of attention strikes me as a useful skill; at others, I wish I hadn't needed to acquire it.

Two key rubrics for the new styles of literacy and spectatorship that have emerged in the past two decades are *skimming* and *sampling*. When *skimming*, we accelerate our reading to get the gist. On the average web page, one study reports, users read about 20 percent of the words.<sup>21</sup> The more text there is to process, the less we absorb and the faster we hit our attention ceiling. *Sampling*, by contrast, is what scientists do when a data set is too large to be analyzed in full. A subset is selected for analysis; results are inferred and then generalized back to the larger unit. This is arguably the best way to experience research-heavy installations within a reasonable time frame and perhaps explains why so much of this art is based on modular units (like Tillmans's tables). We have to assume that the artist doesn't expect us to digest all the material on display, just to taste a few dishes.

However we decide to tackle such installations, the effects of reading online bear directly on our literacy as viewers of art. When large amounts of text are deployed in an installation, it is more likely to be experienced as a continuation of data overload rather than as a sensuous respite. This is not to say that text can't be enjoyable or that it automatically feels like onerous labor. My point is that the craft of assembling language, and how it is presented, needs to transcend quotidian communicational efficiency. Text is never neutral but is shaped by the mode of its delivery.



*Renée Green, Import/Export Funk Office (detail), 1992–93, mixed media, metal shelf structure, books, magazines, newspapers, ephemera, BETA video cases, twenty-five hours of digitized video, two monitors, one video projection, cassette cases, sound, acrylic signs, four wooden structures, acrylic signs on four shelves, four cassette players, thirty wooden plaques with rubber-stamped text. Installation view, Migros Museum, Zurich, 2022. Photo: Stefan Altenburger.*

A review of Renée Green's exhibition at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles in 2015 is notable for containing sentiments not found in criticism of her work twenty years earlier. Tellingly, it couches this criticism in the vocabulary of postdigital fatigue:

This abundance of information—of content—displayed with clinical restraint is difficult to absorb and easiest to conceive of as a grouping of thoughts whose relationship belonged primarily to the artist herself. . . . the viewer browsed around, forever waiting for the artist to arrive in some authorial form to tell her how it fit together. This is what it feels like to be alone with information: awash in abundance, forever waiting for the connection to go through, confronted with the generous and endlessly frustrating opportunity to make sense of matter.<sup>22</sup>

It's not that Green significantly changed her artistic methods after *Import/Export Funk Office*. What has changed is the viewer's ability and desire to put in the effort of looking. An abundance of information without authorial pointers now feels unwelcome, plunging us into intellectual uncertainty. "Waiting for the connection to go through"—the existential limbo of buffering—signals the degree to which certain artistic strategies from the '90s are no longer reaching their audience, who feel less and less willing to take up the baton of co-researcher. Such exhibitions seem to demand a kind of reading that is no longer pleasurable or innovative or liberating but echoes the all-too-routine experience of connecting the dots as we search the Web, frantically trying to synthesize a morass of conflicting opinions (about medical conditions, hotels, recipes). Renouncing the authorial rudder is no longer subversive but experienced as frustrating, burdensome, and opaque.

This is not to invalidate the experiments of the '90s—spatialized materials, a fragmented authorial voice, and information as public resource. In their moment, these were necessary alternatives to the hegemony of white male voices and offered crucial opportunities for cross-disciplinary research that had not yet found a place within academia. Today, however, the stakes have changed. Some formal strategies might need to be rethought. On the other side of aggregation and fragmentation, I find myself yearning for selection and synthesis—a directed series of connections that go beyond the subjective, contingent, and accumulative. In the strongest examples of research-based art, the viewer is offered a signal rather than noise, an original proposition founded on a clear research question rather than inchoate curiosity. If this sounds like a crypto-academic call to apply traditional research criteria to works of art, then it is, to an extent: Earlier, I differentiated between *search* and *research*, and I unabashedly prefer the latter.



View of "Forensic Architecture: Toward an Investigative Aesthetics," 2017, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

But art can also become academic. The practice that best represents the vanguard of research-based art (and a possible fourth phase) is housed at a university and is organized precisely around strong arguments that refute neutrality. Forensic Architecture, an interdisciplinary group of academics based at Goldsmiths, University of London, since 2010, did not begin as an artistic collective but is now recognized as such by museums globally. Although their research has been used in international courtrooms, United Nations assemblies, and truth commissions, it makes more frequent appearances in art institutions, where the group's audiovisual installations elegantly present video, architectural models, maps, timelines, wall texts, and diagrams. The group's interests are multiple but center on state and corporate violations of human rights. Through 3D modeling, pattern analysis, and geolocation, among many other methods, Forensic Architecture uncover counterevidence to the established narrative, often reframing who is culpable. For example, their Turner Prize presentation at Tate Britain in 2018, "The Long Duration of a Split Second," was based on dozens of blurry and chaotic cell-phone videos of the Israeli police's nocturnal raid of a Bedouin village the previous year, which had destroyed buildings and killed two people. Forensic Architecture analyzed the video metadata (e.g., time stamps) and the sound of gunfire—along with eyewitness accounts, autopsy reports, and other materials—to disprove the police's version of what occurred.<sup>23</sup>

In their interdisciplinarity and technophilia, Forensic Architecture have much in common with the first phase of research-based art. Formally, the aesthetic is informational and high-tech. The content is counterhegemonic. The group insist on the value of their work as a public resource. Rather than being noncommittal to avoid didacticism or authoritarianism, however, Forensic Architecture believe that "having an axe to grind should sharpen the quality of one's data rather than blunt one's argument."<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the viewer is carefully taken along the process of the group's research method, which they call "forensis."<sup>25</sup> The spectator is no longer expected to formulate their own arguments (as in phase one), or to second-guess the artist's connections (as in phase three), but to follow the forensic method to its logical conclusion. There is no room for ambiguity or contestation.

My point is not to disparage Forensic Architecture's highly original practice and often dazzlingly inventive research, but to draw attention to how the relationship to truth has changed once more in this genre of art. Data produces information, information produces knowledge, and knowledge produces truth—now in the service of explicitly ethical claims. Yet the viewer's experience of this in the gallery still feels like an exercise in processing and visualizing too much information. The sense of monodirectionality is only intensified by the fact that Forensic Architecture hold our hand throughout.



Anna Boghiguian, *The Salt Traders* (detail), 2015, mixed media. Installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Photo: Peter Cox.

WE NEED TO BE CAREFUL what we wish for: at one pole, the presentation of information without an authorial voice or position; at the other, a position that can't be contested, only agreed with. That said, artistic research can push against the limits of academic research in two ways: first, by allowing personal narrative and challenging an objective relationship to truth via fiction and fabulation (a tendency already present in academia via feminism and Black studies); and second, by presenting research in aesthetic forms that exceed the merely informative (the pleasure of a well-crafted story; connections and juxtapositions that surprise and delight).

Since the late 1970s, Egyptian artist Anna Boghiguian has produced small-scale paintings, collages, and books that reflect her itinerant lifestyle—travels across the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, and farther afield. She investigates the past, charting the intertwining paths that have led to the current moment. Her works on paper and canvas are often overlaid with near-illegible handwritten text that elliptically condenses these narratives. In the past decade, she has integrated these two-dimensional works into installations, such as *The Salt Traders*, 2015, in which drawings that incorporate painting, collage, and handwritten text are displayed on a grid of 144 frames arranged like a large folding screen. The work weaves together a range of global histories in which salt plays a role, from Alexander the Great's discovery of salt lakes to the recent economic crisis in Greece (known as the “collapse of bread and salt”).

While Boghiguian undertakes research online as well as offline, the more important point is that it is embodied and durational: All her literary, historical, and philosophical reading is grounded in time spent on the sites where these events took place. Everything she paints and draws is made on location or from her own photographs. Events are visualized in sketched portraits, jittery lines, bursts of text, and pools of color. The viewer's mode of reception is equally somatic. *The Salt Traders* evidences research on the part of the artist, but synthesizes this into a richly sensory polemical overview that is sculptural and olfactory. Throughout the grids, images and words are intertwined, but also punctuated by empty frames filled with organic materials—sand, salt, and honeycombs—that offer moments of silence and opacity and a chance to pause, inhale, and reflect.



Boghiguan's internalization and processing of history is not simply the outcome of digital meandering (although that inevitably plays a role). It is a lived, sensuous encounter that has been digested. The format of the grid enables a line of inquiry that is nonlinear but not unstructured, while the honeycomb frames anchor the research in a nondigital apparatus of communication. Nor is it an unmediated truth claim: *The Salt Traders* is a poetic and critical journey of visualized connections between the past and today—one in which history is presented as messy, unfinished business.

Boghiguan's work, like the much better-known practice of Lebanese artist Walid Raad, points to some of the differences between search and research, and between information aggregation and original lines of questioning. It doesn't drag us back to academic criteria of rigor but asserts and embraces artistic idiosyncrasy—a difference that seems particularly pressing when we're faced with the development of new AI search engines, image generators, and GPTs (generative pretrained transformers). As British artist Mark Leckey commented a decade ago, "Research has to go through a body; it has to be lived in some sense—transformed into some sort of lived experience—in order to become whatever we might call art. . . . A lot of art now just points at things. Merely the transfer of something into a gallery is enough to bracket it as art."<sup>26</sup> The richest possibilities for research-based installation emerge when preexisting information is not simply cut and pasted, aggregated, and dropped in a vitrine but *metabolized* by an idiosyncratic thinker who feels their way through the world. Such artists show that interpretative syntheses need not be incompatible with a decentered subject and that an unforgettable story-image can also be a subversive counterhistory, packing all the more punch because imaginatively and artfully delivered.

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