

# “My Work Is Work”:

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## Artistic Research Practice and Knowledge Creation in the Work of Carmen Winant and Tomashi Jackson

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**Abstract**—Many studies on the information-seeking habits of artists have been largely library-centric instead of considering the entire process of artists as integral to their research. This article examines the research behavior of artists Carmen Winant and Tomashi Jackson. The study recognizes the past literature on the information-seeking behavior of artists, framing it within literature by and for artists on artistic research practice. From this perspective, the authors analyze how research manifests into physical artwork in the cases of these two artists in order to situate the act of making as knowledge and research creation.

### INTRODUCTION

*“I’ve learned that, my work is work. So, I try to work through these histories that link us as members of the public. And I’m comforted by the history of painting to hold me inside of all of this. I’m just trying to understand the world around me.”*

—Tomashi Jackson<sup>1</sup>

Perceptions of artists and their information habits, particularly by information professionals, have long relied on library-centric understandings of information and research, often framed within outmoded and stereotypical conceptions of the artist as patron. Sandra Cowan, in a 2004 article on this topic, addresses the idea that most librarian-driven studies of artists and research have centered on the library. The failing

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1. “Museums: Tomashi Jackson on Color Theory and Race. Whitney Museum of Art” *Daily Plinth*, July 8, 2019, <http://dailyplinth.com/videos/museums-tomashi-jackson-on-color-theory-and-race/>.

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of this, as Cowan and others have pointed out, is that artists are at times portrayed as conducting research “incorrectly” or not being interested in traditional research, when the truth is that artists source information from a varied number of places, and that the library is just one. Research, to artists, may encompass any number of aspects of their practice. “Information seeking” is not relegated to words on a page but may be extended to the notions of seeking information on the tactile quality of materials, the chemical makeup of paint, or the reaction of two media married unconventionally.

While many studies undertaken after Cowan’s article was published rely on the words and responses of artists themselves, fewer have turned away from the established “information-seeking behaviors” literature in order to consider how artists talk about their research practices outside of the library. To better understand artists’ needs and their experiences with information outside of library-centric discourses, the authors sought to include works written for artists rather than librarians. While many of these artist-authors reinforce what the library literature affirms, they also shed light on the role of art information in the studio, in materiality and making, and in the academy at large.

With this enriched, more artist-centric understanding of artistic research practice, this article profiles and examines the work of two significant emerging artists, Carmen Winant and Tomashi Jackson, whose work shows a varied relationship to what some may refer to as traditional research practices. However, even within “traditional” research, the methods and means vary depending on the aims of the artists, as with researchers in any field. Examining how these artists’ works visually convey the product of their research, the authors critically deconstruct the perception that artists are more “mad genius” than dedicated professionals and explore the epistemic frameworks from which these artists conduct their work, which often diverge from the type of knowledge commonly held in library spaces. To do so, the authors investigate, through the lens of artists themselves, how artists gather and process information, as well as how that information surfaces visually in the work.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to lifting the curtain on the value-judgment-laden tone of many of the information-seeking behavior authors that preceded her, Cowan focused her study on a single artist’s information needs in a holistic sense. This contrasted with earlier studies from Joan Day and Elizabeth McDowell, Deirdre Stam, and Susie Cobbledick, all of which focused on artists’ and art students’ use of library materials. For instance, Stam’s study derived its anecdotal evidence from art librarians rather than their patrons, revealing the impression of many art librarians that their patrons were either difficult to work with or incapable of understanding library protocols or, in one case, even reading.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Stam’s study, Cobbledick’s 1996 study focused on practicing artists, yielding perhaps some of the most important and evergreen insights

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2. Deirdre Stam, “Artists and Art Libraries,” *Art Libraries Journal* 20, no.2 (1995): 21–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307472200009329>.

into creative practitioners' information-seeking behavior thus far in the literature.<sup>3</sup> Cobbletick separated the most important types of information for artists into five categories: inspiration, visual, technical, art trends and events, and business.<sup>4</sup> Though Cobbletick's study shed significant light on artists' information-seeking behavior, the focus remained primarily on library resources.

In light of this earlier work, and despite the important contributions found within, Cowan's study is remarkable in identifying many of the shortcomings of library-centric descriptions of artists that render them eccentric, unusual, or even frustrating with which to interact. Cowan suggests that in this literature there exists "a tacit assumption that there is a correct way to use libraries, and a strong thread of belief that artists deviate from this correct usage."<sup>5</sup> She asserts that the model of the information-seeking behavior study is something of a conceit, given the business interests that these studies often service for library vendors looking for a commercial need to fill. Indeed, the primary assumption that information seeking itself is characterized by a "perceived need, by a lack, rather than a creative process motivated by curiosity, pleasure, or sensory feedback" runs counter to the experience of seeking, finding, or being found by information that the artist she interviewed described.<sup>6</sup> In a 2008 literature review, William Hemmig extrapolated that "many librarians lack sympathy with artists' information-seeking processes and are disinclined to accommodate those processes when providing services."<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, many of the studies that followed Cowan's article reveal an increase in consideration and acceptance of artists' and creative practitioners' information needs beyond the library, and a departure from traditional conceptions of library or art librarians. Helen Mason and Lyn Robinson, studying emerging artists, found that this highly personal and idiosyncratic approach to information-as-inspiration also relates to artists' indifference towards disciplinary boundaries, or the limits of the art library, noting "they extend far beyond the remit of any possible library or information service to satisfy. There are essentially no boundaries to what can count as 'art information'; as witness one respondent's listing of 'everything' as an inspiration."<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Kasia Leousis describes working with MFA students in the studio in terms of a dialogue between librarian and artist that is comfortable, organic, and free-flowing rather than focused on the use of specific resources or outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Leousis's experience

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3. Susie Cobbletick, "The Information-Seeking Behavior of Artists: Exploratory Interviews," *The Library Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1996): 343–72, <https://doi.org/10.1086/602909>.

4. Cobbletick, "The Information-Seeking Behavior of Artists," 343–72.

5. Sandra Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry: Information Needs and Sources of Artists," *Art Documentation* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 14–20, <https://doi.org/10.1086/adx.23.2.27949312>.

6. Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry," 18.

7. William S. Hemming, "The Information-Seeking Behavior of Visual Artists: A Literature Review," *Journal of Documentation* 64, no. 3 (April 2008): 343–62, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410810867579>.

8. Helen Mason and Lyn Robinson, "The Information-Related Behaviour of Emerging Artists and Designers: Inspiration and Guidance for New Practitioners," *Journal of Documentation* 67, no. 1 (2011): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411111105498>.

9. Kasia Leousis, "Outreach to Artists: Supporting the Development of a Research Culture for Master of Fine Arts Students," *Art Documentation* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669994>.

resonates with Cowan's description of the artists' information need and research process "as moving, relational, organic, dialogic and iterative"<sup>10</sup> and resists the librarian's urge to conceive of the information need as "simple, identifiable and resolvable."<sup>11</sup> If they cannot resolve an information need, however, some might wonder what place art librarians have in studio art research practice.

While many of these more recent studies treat the artist or creative practitioner as the subject of research and accept non-library information as legitimate and appropriate sources of information, fewer have looked beyond the confines of the library. In an attempt to mitigate this, this article examines writings on artistic research practice written by artists, for artists, in a hope to further decenter the library and its usage as the metric by which research by visual artists and designers is understood. While there are many important approaches and interventions deployed by art librarians in the literature, the turn away from libraries and towards artists is deliberate.<sup>12</sup> Rather than understanding these patrons through a library filter, the authors seek instead to uncover what artists say about information and their practices in their own words and on their own terms. This does not deny that many art librarians who work with studio artists and designers are invested in the research practices of their patrons and implicitly understand their relationship to information, but it makes that understanding explicit and informed by the patrons themselves in order to ground and enrich librarians' practices. In Graeme Sullivan's *Art Practice as Research*, the author conceives of a figure known as the artist-theorist, whose studio functions as potent theoretical site of inquiry and critique, and who is capable of an artistic practice in which the artist is "seen as both the researcher and the researched."<sup>13</sup> The two artists interviewed and examined later in this article are astute examples of this idea, as well as many others that are explored in the artist literature.

Much of the writing by artists on research understandably focuses on the teaching of art and artistic practice, the place of visual arts programs within the academy, and the ways in which making creates knowledge within the maker and viewer of art objects. The evolution of the conception of art as "an individual gift, a cultural collectible, a social nicety, a vocation, or a profession in a need of a home" reflects the various ways that the artist has been conceived of as a producer and consumer of knowledge, as well as the artist within academic spaces, particularly libraries.<sup>14</sup> Within higher education, therefore, the fit with other "traditional" research-oriented disciplines has not been one that adequately captures research practice for artists and, as Estelle Barrett argues,

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10. Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry," 18–19.

11. Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry," 18.

12. There are many articles, case studies, and project summaries in the library literature that show the ways in which art librarians have applied their understanding of artists' and designers' information needs through collections, information literacy instruction, programming, and outreach. This literature is voluminous and of great value to art library practitioners looking for effective application of many of these concepts. The goal of this article is to ground those practices and enrich the foundation of knowledge upon which they are built, and to provide additional insight into knowledge acquisition inside and outside of the library.

13. Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), xix.

14. Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 10.

has led to the continuous devaluation of studio-based research within the academy.<sup>15</sup> Natalie Loveless, in her manifesto for “research-creation,” argues that this position in the academy is exacerbated further by the rise of visual arts programs that blend “traditional” research with making, placing artists trained in the atelier model to become “worried that their disciplinary modes of knowing and producing are being forced to become more ‘academic’ even when they don’t want (or need) to be.”<sup>16</sup> Loveless further asserts that the notion of “research-creation” need not be a harbinger of doom to artistic ways of knowing, but rather a site of “resistance to individualist, careerist, and bibliometric university cultures”—a perception that art information professionals who are also engaged in resisting this type of corporatized academic and/or library culture might take under consideration.<sup>17</sup>

The tension between academic research practices and artistic ways of knowing partially emerges in Sullivan’s artist-theorist figure, who is not bound by prescribed methodologies or disciplinary norms, but rather is inquiry- and issue-driven, able to adapt frameworks around such a concern or inquiry. When engaging in this work, “artists make informed choices about the imaginative and intellectual approaches they use when they create and respond to art.”<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Grierson and Laura Brearley point out that the methodologies available to creative practitioners are seemingly endless, from narrative and ethnography to discourse analysis and empirical methodologies. The artist is able to select from these methodologies by considering “the project aims, the particular subject under examination, the epistemological frameworks of the field, the questions framing the project, and the politics of researcher.”<sup>19</sup> Brad Haseman, moreover, asserts that artists engaged in practice-led research are not “thinking” their way out of a problem or inquiry, but rather “practicing” or making their way to a resolution. The act of making or engaging in a regular artistic practice is also an embodied methodology for creating knowledge or resolving an inquiry.<sup>20</sup> Barbara Bolt furthers this consideration of the role of inquiry and knowledge-construction through making by asserting that materials themselves are not merely passive tools to be wielded by the artist, but that they provide their own intelligence that interacts with and is activated through the artist’s intelligence.<sup>21</sup> In the case of design, Peter Downton argues that the knowledge transmitted between designer and user when the designed object is used or studied is comparable to the activation and transfer of knowledge during the act of reading.

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15. Estelle Barrett, “Introduction,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 2.

16. Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 8.

17. Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 9.

18. Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 173.

19. Elizabeth Grierson and Laura Brearley, “Ways of Knowing and Being: Navigating the Conditions of Knowledge and Becoming a Creative Subject,” in *Creative Arts Research: Narratives of Methodologies and Practices*, eds. Elizabeth Grierson and Laura Brearley (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 21.

20. Brad Haseman, “Rupture and Recognition: Identifying the Performative Research Paradigm,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 147.

21. Barbara Bolt, “The Magic Is in the Handling,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 30.

Downton asserts, “Works are repositories of knowledge. Taken in total they form a great part of the collective knowledge of design disciplines and the evidential material stored within them can be transmitted to others.”<sup>22</sup> While many of these authors place differential emphasis on material processes and other knowledge practices within artistic research, ultimately the presence of both in the literature, as well as the tension regarding their respective importance, signals that they are persistent aspects of artistic research practice.

Sullivan argues that central to artistic research and inquiry is the process of understanding, and in this case understanding that “increases our understanding of whom [*sic*] we are and about the world in which we live,” and that the process of gaining this understanding through interpersonal engagement has the potential for individual liberation and sociocultural interpretation.<sup>23</sup> According to Sullivan, “it is the centrality of visual arts to human engagement that warrants the development of a theoretically robust foundation for research in order to extend the important role of art in institutional, political, and cultural settings.”<sup>24</sup> Barrett continues this line of thinking, noting that the often subjective, personal, and emotional motivations of artistic research practice create the possibilities of bringing together both explicit and tacit knowledge, therefore revealing expressions of lived experiences and bringing to the viewer realities or futurities that would be otherwise unavailable or marginalized.<sup>25</sup>

These works written by creative practitioners, for creative practitioners, when taken in tandem with the library-centric literature of the information needs of artists, convey a complex and flexible relationship with knowledge consumption and creation in an artist’s practice. Information needs and sources are difficult to pin down. Just as the artistic output varies infinitely, so too may the information input as well as the methodological strain by which an artist gathers and interprets information. This process has the potential to be dialogic and centered on building individual or community consciousness, embodied through materials and making, centered on personal exploration or tacit knowledge, and ultimately completely outside the epistemic boundaries of “discipline” or “subject.” These qualities of artistic research practice have profound implications for the place of the visual arts and design within the academy for better or for worse and, as an often-miniaturized version of the academic institution at large, the academic or research library.<sup>26</sup> While it would be revealing to focus on how these

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22. Peter Downton, “Ways of Constructing: Epistemic, Temporal, and Productive Aspects of Design Research,” in *Creative Arts Research: Narratives of Methodologies and Practices*, eds. Elizabeth Gierson and Laura Brearley (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 124.

23. Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 74.

24. Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 75.

25. Estelle Barrett, “Foucault’s ‘What Is an Author’: Towards a Critical Discourse of Practice as Research,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 143.

26. Jennifer Ferretti has spoken on art as information, specifically as this concept relates to art librarians working within the academy. Ferretti published her most recent keynote on this topic, which is included here as further reading: Jennifer A. Ferretti, “Disciplines as Domination: How Interrogating Research and Knowledge will Help Make Our Libraries and Archives More Equitable,” Medium, August 4, 2020, <https://medium.com/@CityThatReads/disciplines-as-domination-how-interrogating-traditional-research-and-knowledge-will-help-make-our-fe498b8a247a>.

implications burrow themselves within academic libraries or the practices of art librarians within them, to do so in this study would be to obfuscate the information practices of creative practitioners that exist both within and without these physical and virtual spaces.

Perhaps ironically, exploring the artist literature makes many tacit assumptions about artists’ information more explicit and provides a robust framework and language for understanding that process. By placing that understanding outside of the information literacy classroom, collections policy, or even library committee meeting, one can also more closely see how information surfaces in the work itself, and as aesthetically significant in its own right. While the following case studies do not conclusively reinforce this “in their own words” methodology for understanding creative practitioners’ information acquisition, it does demonstrate the ways in which research can be examined outside the survey or focus group, but in the fruits of that research and through the ways in which their makers experience information.

## **TWO ARTISTS, TWO OUTCOMES**

The following section profiles two artists, both of whom rely both on “traditional” or academic-style research practices (and spaces, such as libraries) alongside the “non-traditional” practices in their work. Both artists were interviewed by the authors on their processes and ideas about research as artists. Poignantly, themes emerged in both conversations that revealed the ideas of observation, experimentation, and record keeping as central to how artists might do research. Additionally, both artists describe the act of making, as Sullivan does, as inseparable from the process of knowing. The practice and the work bring about understanding for both the artist and the viewer. Carmen Winant explains in response to the phrase “information-seeking”:

What does research really mean for the artist? Could we [artists] just say—oh, in my research, and research can mean anything? It can mean the way that we mix paint. It can mean you know, more conventional academic research in and around like the American Civil War. It could just be sort of anything and everything and that’s kind of accepted, as you know, what it is that an artist performs.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, a component of research for Tomashi Jackson lies in the experimentation with color to convey interpretative opportunities for the viewer and also herself, as the artist. This idea that materiality forms one critical piece of the research in addition to the act of making runs through the work of both artists.

## **CARMEN WINANT**

Carmen Winant is an associate professor and Roy Lichtenstein Chair of Studio Art at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. She is an artist and writer and was also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Photography in 2019. Winant’s work falls within the lineage of photographers using found imagery to construct larger,

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27. Carmen Winant (artist), in discussion with the authors, May 5, 2020.



assembled compositions. Created with a defined feminist point of view, one may consider the strong stance of Winant's perspective within the framework of other artists before her who took on the condition of women in their work, such as Hannah Hoch, Cindy Sherman, and Hannah Wilke. All three of these artists were focused on the body as a dichotomous site of oppression, liberation, and expression. Winant's work strongly follows in those footsteps.

Winant's installation and subsequent artist's book *My Birth* (2018) (Figure 1) invoke the straightforwardly feminist methods of such second-wave artists as Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneeman. Winant's focus on what has historically been considered a taboo topic also echoes work by Alice Neel, who produced a series of portraits depicting people in pregnancy.<sup>28</sup> First shown as a large-scale installation in the Museum of Modern Art's *Being: New Photography* exhibition in 2018, *My Birth* displays thousands of images of childbirth "sourced from informational materials, such as books, pamphlets and magazines—all aimed at women," adhered to the wall with simple blue painter's tape.<sup>29</sup> Installed in a hallway (Figure 2), the installation envelopes viewers, in some ways imitating the birth canal and recalling the primordial act of giving birth as it surrounded museum goers on both sides.

The repetition of flesh and emotion reiterates the transformative action of being born and on becoming in general—becoming a parent. In turn, the juxtaposition of the sterile white museum walls against the iteration of bodily fluid, pain, and ecstasy highlights the tenuous union of modern Western medical practice and the visceral quality of childbirth. Winant's practice itself also imitates elements of birth. Tearing and cutting found images wherever she can find them, the raw edges of the images lay bare the miraculous but violent act of bringing another human into the world. The book, published after the exhibition, contains many of the images included in the exhibition along with Winant's family photos and her own childbirth documentation from her two sons' births.<sup>30</sup> The addition of personal photographs speaks to the importance of record keeping, as well as the inherently intimate nature of this topic. As Charlotte Jansen notes, "*My Birth* is not only an artwork that prompts wider questions about women and their position in the world, physically and politically, but it addresses a void. The work has had an unprecedented reaction, encouraging more women to speak of their own experiences and to shatter some of the stigmas around childbirth and motherhood."<sup>31</sup> Winant's choice of material—found photographs reassembled—is crucial to understanding the work, reaffirming Bolt's hypothesis that choice of material is as important a part of research for the artist as anything else.<sup>32</sup> In Winant's case, the photographs visually capture the primal history of childbirth, which has been turned away from and glossed over in art and in entertainment.

28. Pamela Allara, "Mater' of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes," *American Art* 8, no. 2 (1994): 7–31.

29. Charlotte Jansen, "Carmen Winant Dispels Taboos around Childbirth with an Unflinching Project," *The British Journal of Photography* 166, no. 7879 (2019): 60.

30. Jansen, "Carmen Winant Dispels Taboos around Childbirth with an Unflinching Project," 60.

31. Jansen, "Carmen Winant Dispels Taboos around Childbirth with an Unflinching Project," 61.

32. Barbara Bolt, "The Magic Is in the Handling," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).





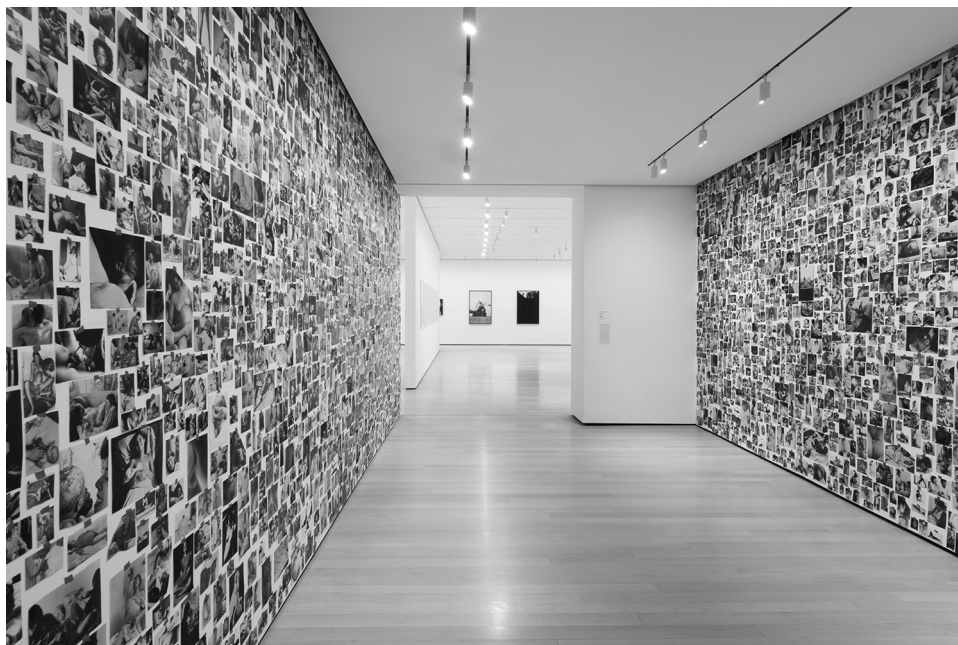
**Figure 1.** Carmen Winant (b. 1983) © Copyright. Installation view of the exhibition *Being: New Photography 2018*, March 18, 2018–August 19, 2018. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Pictured: Carmen Winant’s *My Birth*, 2018. Photographer: Martin Seck. Please see the online edition of *Art Documentation* for a color version of this image.

While immersive, *My Birth* is not comprehensive. In addition to addressing the void of birthing images within the art world and mainstream culture, there is another void present in the work. A cursory glance at the images in the piece exposes an obvious lack of Black bodies, in addition to non-vaginal birth. Winant has pointed this out in interviews and included it in the wall text for the show. Winant’s work brings to light a clear omission of BIPOC bodies in maternal documentation and instructional material, the elements of which largely make up Winant’s imagery in this case.<sup>33</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control, in the United States, “Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native (AI/AN) women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women.”<sup>34</sup> The lack of source material available to Winant to adequately include a Black mother’s experience in *My Birth* accentuates the different treatment Black women are offered as pregnant people.<sup>35</sup> In the United

33. BIPOC is used here to indicate Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

34. “Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 6, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2019/p0905-racial-ethnic-disparities-pregnancy-deaths.html>.

35. Linda Villarosa, “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2018. Villarosa notes that Black infant mortality has been statistically higher than babies born to white parents for a long time, recounting statistics from as far back as 1850: “The reported infant-mortality rate was 340 per 1,000; the white rate was 217 per 1,000.” This article includes accompanying images produced by the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier. For further reading on this series by Frazier, see Nicole Caruth, “Black Birth Matters,” *The Ostrakon*, May 18, 2020, <https://theostrakon.net/black-birth-matters/>.



**Figure 2.** Carmen Winant (b. 1983) © Copyright. Installation view of the exhibition *Being: NewPhotography 2018*, March 18, 2018–August 19, 2018. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Pictured: Carmen Winant’s *My Birth*, 2018). Photographer: Martin Seck. Please see the online edition of *Art Documentation* for a color version of this image.

States, the maternal mortality rate has gone up in the past twenty-five years, and within that statistic, it is Black women who suffer “maternal death and near-death” the most frequently.<sup>36</sup> While health experts continue to study this to determine why it happens and how treatment of Black pregnant people can be improved, it is notable that Winant’s work causes the viewer (and indeed the artist herself) to contemplate this lack through the act of making. In creating the work, Winant has not made a statement about this issue, necessarily, but has created space for a dialogue not solely centered around the taboo of childbirth and maternal experience, but also one that addresses who is left out. In this case the answer is Black women, and now one can ask: *Why?* And to what effect?

Winant’s experience with research as an artist has taken turns based on her life circumstances and what has become either available to her or been harder to achieve, as life changes (such as having children) have squeezed her freedom of time and the ability to travel frequently. As Winant notes, “I don’t have time to go on these pilgrimages that I used to.”<sup>37</sup> Most recently, COVID-19 disrupted much of the access artists would have to physical archives, estate sales (which Winant frequents for books and magazines) and other in-person image hunting opportunities. Long before COVID, though, Winant expressed that becoming more geographically bound forced her to learn and explore digital resources, such as [archive.org](http://archive.org), to help her see a book before hunting

36. Villarosa, “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis.”

37. Carmen Winant (artist), in discussion with the authors, May 5, 2020.

down a copy herself that she can then disassemble and recompose into a finished work. An examination of this aspect of Winant’s process revisits the idea of process as research, and that the materiality of a thing and physically altering it is crucial to putting together a finished work. The act of undoing and recompiling, in this case, contributes to both development of knowledge and understanding for the artist and viewer.

Another of Winant’s recent works—an artist’s book called *Notes on Fundamental Joy: Seeking the Elimination of Oppression through the Social and Political Transformation of the Patriarchy That Otherwise Threatens to Bury Us* (2019)—required Winant to shift her research practice. Rather than cutting images out of books and magazines, the artist located images of intentional communities of feminist lesbian women in the Pacific Northwest by consulting archives held at the University of Oregon.<sup>38</sup> The result affects the feeling of the work. Rather than creating her own archive on a topic, such as childbirth and labor in *My Birth*, Winant instead curated and editorialized the experiences of the women who contributed to these communities, who were in many cases artists themselves, such as Tee Corinne, Ruth Mountaingrove, and Carol Newhouse. Winant is quick to point out that in all ways possible (other than identifying as a woman herself), she stands outside the boundaries of these communities: the primary difference being that she does not identify as lesbian, while all the women represented in her book do.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike many of her other projects, which involve the making of an archive of images, Winant instead had to rely on images already cataloged, documented, and preserved for this particular project. Not only that, but as she was often working from afar, Winant was compelled to rely on graduate students and archival assistants to visit the physical archival spaces and “curate” a selection of images for her to peruse. The project also involved speaking with women who had lived in these communities and made these pictures. Winant explains:

So much of that [*Notes on Fundamental Joy*] was about conversations with the women who were still alive, either women who lived on these women’s lands, these separate communities. That was different kind of information seeking that was not so much about like: go through all your pictures and tell me what you have. It was like: what was this experience like for you, you know? Tell me about making pictures in these communities.<sup>40</sup>

Though Winant emphasizes how far outside of the lesbian lands communities she is situated as a heterosexual artist, it is significant that so much of what went into *Notes on Fundamental Joy* were conversations with those who *were* involved. In an attempt to understand thoroughly why these communities existed and what it was like to live

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38. For more information on the Lesbian Lands archival collection at the University of Oregon, see <https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/lesbian-lands>.

39. Carmen Winant (artist), in discussion with the authors, May 5, 2020.

40. Carmen Winant (artist), in discussion with the authors, May 5, 2020.

there and make artwork there, Winant inadvertently made herself a part of their story by curating and documenting photographs that were not published elsewhere. In doing so, Winant also recorded oral histories for the communities and women with whom she was in conversation. She became part of the documentation and preservation process, and that work was the research.

However, Winant had to start in the archive. As she has stated frequently, other projects, such as *My Birth*, serve as ad hoc archives of birth images, frequently left out of mainstream literature and certainly omitted from the Western art historical canon, even as pregnant bodies are idealized. Yet, in working with actual archives, some things materialized for Winant: namely, that knowing how to research in archives is an acquired skill, and one that, even once acquired, may have to adapt to the culture and peculiarities of a particular archive. This is crucial information for a librarian who works with artists, especially artists who may be interested in primary source material for their own point of departure. In a talk given in her department in spring 2020, Winant showed slides on what this looks like—slides with information librarians and archivists know, such as how to look at a finding aid, box numbers, and how archives are often measured in linear feet. Although these types of records and finding aids are familiar to librarians, it is important to note that most people listening to the talk had either never researched with those tools or perhaps even been formally in an archive to do research. In short, Winant, whose research has more typically taken on a more organic, search-and-find nature, was forced in this project, in many ways, to do as librarians and historians do. The end result is one with a more curatorial tone. Although the aims of the work are the same—developing knowledge from the assembly of images and text—*Notes on Fundamental Joy* is ultimately more formal and physically restrained than *My Birth*, a reflection of the process through which it emerged.

### TOMASHI JACKSON

Tomashi Jackson, an artist based out of New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts, has been described by some as an “important emerging voice” and a “post-Rauschenberg” artist.<sup>41</sup> While Jackson’s aesthetic certainly evokes Rauschenberg’s combines to a degree, the work itself emerges from a singular vision. Jackson’s art, like Winant’s, is concerned with political conditions of oppression—in her case, the oppression of Black people in the United States. Unlike Winant, Jackson utilizes paint and other materials to create large abstract mixed media pieces that are anything but straightforward. Jackson’s work is rooted deeply in research. For Jackson, the research is not only archival, but wide-ranging, often sensory: “I listen a lot. Like I listen and smell a lot. I look a lot and kind of wait for a pressing issue to reveal itself.”<sup>42</sup> This remark from Jackson is in line with observations by Mason and Robinson who found

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41. “Jane Panetta: Associate Curator at the Whitney Museum, New York, and Co-Curator of the 2019 Whitney Biennial,” *Flash Art International* 52, no. 325 (April 2019): 33; Paul Ardenne, “Whitney Biennial 2019 (English),” *Art-Press*, no. 468 (July 2019): 64–65.

42. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.

in their study that artists pull inspiration and information from everywhere.<sup>43</sup> In an interview with the authors of this article, Jackson also revealed how much of her work centers on the omission of knowledge and information from traditional stewards of those things, as well as a dependence on record keeping of all kinds.

For Jackson, a sense of a place is integral to the finished product. For a recent exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts (*Tomashi Jackson: Love Rollercoaster*), for example, she was focused on the experience of Black Ohioans who participate in voting. Because of COVID-19, Jackson was unable to travel to Columbus, a loss felt in the absence of impromptu conversations with the people who live in the area, as well as the inability to visit archival collections at The Ohio State University. In spite of this, Jackson emphasizes that her well-developed methodology of talking to real people (in this case, meetings with Black Ohioans over Zoom) carried her through the project. To get an idea of how the work evolves for Jackson, it may be best to use her own words:

I made a body of work in Georgia that was my first institutional solo show, and I didn't know what it was gonna be about. I got there and spent some time there during site visits and the subject matter revealed itself in the infrastructure of the city for me. And that kind of started to determine the nature of the questions that I asked people when I met them at parties, when I met them at openings, at restaurants. I started to ask people about their experiences with transportation, private and public. Because I didn't know that Atlanta had such a knotty web of freeways.<sup>44</sup>

There are many threads that stitch their way through Jackson's work, but two that recur frequently are community engagement and inquiry. From the beginning of her career, place and the public that make up a place have held a fascination for her, which shows up in the work. The subjects of her paintings appear out of conversations she had with people that drive the direction and focus on the questions she asks through making. While living in the Mission District of San Francisco, for instance, a wave of gentrification began to change the city and the rest of the Bay Area. Jackson, interested in understanding what was happening and how it was affecting people, took surveys to the bar she frequented: “I would show up at the club, and certain guys were trying to holler at me, and I would use that opportunity to ask them if they noticed any changes in their community in the last like, five years, like five to seven years.”<sup>45</sup> This line of questioning is just one that appears in Jackson's work, which, like research, does not provide hard and fast answers, but rather encourages more inquiry on the part of the viewer.

Jackson holds an MFA from Yale University as well as an MS in Art, Culture, and Technology from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But Jackson's career, as she tells it, began when she dropped out of art school and began working with mural artists

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43. Mason and Robinson, “The Information-Related Behaviour of Emerging Artists and Designers,” 176.

44. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.

45. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.



in the San Francisco Bay Area in California, specifically Juana Alicia and Susan Cervantes, who both worked on the Women's Building in San Francisco.<sup>46</sup> Jackson began by painting on a large scale, utilizing color and invoking the incredible tradition of Mexican muralists. Jackson credits this experience with her ability to research within communities. Speaking about her apprenticeship with Juana Alicia, Jackson expresses:

I was handed to her, and she taught me how to climb scaffolding and how to paint murals, how to work with community, how to ask questions, how to be in a place that one is not from and conduct research and oneself. To gather stories, and then to process those stories visually. To create a product that reflects vicinity specific narratives.<sup>47</sup>

Her current work is the product of dedicated research into both current and historical violence against Black people, compressed into complex abstract pieces that are at once sculpture, photograph, print, and painting. In a video of a studio visit made during the 2019 *Whitney Biennial*, Jackson notes that “a part of how I work, in using color to visualize narratives of public concern, is using archival photography and contemporary photography, breaking them down into halftone lines, and creating visual circumstances in which they become collapsed—the histories literally collapse.”<sup>48</sup>

Jackson also notes the great influence color theorists, particularly Josef Albers, have played in her work. Albers's *Interaction of Color*, for example, provided artists with an understanding of how one thing affects another, that there are no hard and fast rules or lines, but instead visual elements such as color that blur and interact with each other in different ways. Similarly, Jackson's use of imagery in her paintings blurs the line between media and one's perceptions of what is a current event or a historical one. By reducing the photographs to halftone lines, she establishes the necessity of viewing current events through a historical lens, bridging the present with the past, where it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to decide which era the viewer is looking at—this is intentional. The current Black Lives Matter movement provides context for this idea—that the atrocities rendered against Black people in the United States historically are still occurring. History still has resonance. Jackson has also remarked on Albers's proposal for a new way of thinking, one that fell outside of the literal black and white lines of segregation. A refugee himself, the context of Albers's own work was embedded in the struggles occurring around him during the middle of the twentieth century. Jackson notes:

Sixty years ago, there was a need for anti-lynching legislation because people had to be told that there were consequences for kidnapping people and hanging them from trees, cutting babies from pregnant women, castrating men, and setting them on fire. And it was opposed. The Tuskegee syphilis experiments ended in 1972.

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46. For more information on the Women's Building, see <https://womensbuilding.org/the-mural/>.

47. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.

48. “Museums: Tomashi Jackson on Color Theory and Race.”

This is the social backdrop of *Interaction of Color*. Whether or not Albers spoke frankly about it, European ex-patriots [*sic*] were aware and more willing to acknowledge the fact of this horror than many Americans for whom such violence was normal.<sup>49</sup>

Jackson has found that abstraction is the best way for her to convey this content.

Not only are the subjects of her works deeply researched, but so too are her methods. Risa Puelo interviewed Jackson over the course of a year, highlights of which were published in an article for *Hyperallergic*.<sup>50</sup> This piece gets to the heart of Jackson’s process and considerations, uncovering the archival and precise nature of her work. Just like the color theorists, there is science in the combinations of color and medium that Jackson brings together in her paintings. Every choice is intentional. Interestingly, while studying at Cooper Union, Jackson moved away from vibrant color in an attempt to move away to some degree from her work with muralists in San Francisco. As she explains, “All of my palette decisions had been based on getting the most attention from public viewership that is presumed to be at the street level.”<sup>51</sup> While at Cooper Union, Jackson utilized only black ink, effectively sobering the mood of the work. The reintroduction of color into her work happened as a response to images she made being perceived purely as historical in studio critique. At the time, she was utilizing the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) Image Archive, and while many of the images were in fact in black and white, the point of the work was not to present a historical document, but rather to comment on the fact that these atrocities were still happening. Moving forward, Jackson reintroduced color into her work by taking out black entirely: “I would only reproduce those images from the 1950s and 60s and 40s—these historic images—I would only produce them using super bright colors, sometimes so bright that they couldn’t even be seen in silkscreen prints on paper.”<sup>52</sup> By removing the black ink, the images give way to the surface of the canvas, disintegrating the concept of past or present in the reading of the work.

As Puelo describes, “Through a deft integration of mediums, Jackson is guided by methods of desegregation and dehierarchization. She visualizes a merger of historical and contemporary experiences of color perception, and she considers their effects on human life in public space in America.”<sup>53</sup> Jackson goes on to describe how the nature of the court cases and events she researches manifest into the artwork itself.

Marshall and the LDF [NAACP Legal Defense Fund] were the first legal team to use photography as a key element of their strategy. I use photography and print-making to weave documentation of *Brown*-related cases with contemporary imagery of human rights abuse and advocacy. I turn photographs into halftone

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49. Risa Puelo, “The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism,” *Hyperallergic*, December 14, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/345021/the-linguistic-overlap-of-color-theory-and-racism/>.

50. Puelo, “The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism.”

51. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.

52. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.

53. Puelo, “The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism.”



line images for printing. This allows me to use printmaking to draw into my paintings with cross-hatched lines. The photographic image serves to introduce graphic color into the painting ground. It formally comes back to the discipline of drawing. I love when things emerge over time, like moments that differentiate the treated and raw gauze or when a cluster of cross-hatched lines, embroidered or printed, reveals a courtroom scene.<sup>54</sup>

Jackson's description of her own work offers several insights. First, the artist must act as a historian, securing a thorough and nuanced understanding of historical events. Second, the artist must act as a journalist, discovering facts and details about the contemporary parallels in today's world. Third, a vast understanding of the chemical makeup and procedural methods of art materials and art making is necessary to achieve the kinds of large-scale works that Jackson produces. Evident in her abstraction is exaction and experimentation, but never without a purpose. Though speaking from the point of view of a designer, Downton points out that "design processes use knowledge, but in addition, designing produces personal knowing for designers and ultimately this can become collective knowledge."<sup>55</sup> Jackson's work exemplifies this perfectly—her work calls for not simple understanding but for an interpretative experience built on collective consciousness.

One of Jackson's most recent shows, *Forever My Lady*, also marked a milestone for her as an artist, as it was her first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, her hometown. As mentioned earlier, a sense of place is integral to Jackson's research and practice, and this body of work is no different. Pulling from her family's archive, Jackson collapsed personal family photographs with "images of the documentary photographer, Eugene Richards, his coverage in the 80s and 90s of addicts, sex workers, and dealers on the east coast."<sup>56</sup> As Jackson describes it, her family's archive is of particular importance for her because it is so sparse. Her family tree is difficult to follow, the result of which is that she does not have a sense of lineage in the ways that some do.

Not all of the pieces include family photographs. *Ecology of Fear (Gillum for Governor of Florida) (Freedom Riders bus bombed by KKK)* (2020) (Figures 3 and 4), one of two works titled *Ecology of Fear*, is a nod to Mike Davis, who penned *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*.<sup>57</sup> As Jackson describes, multiple pieces from *Forever My Lady* address the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but this work in particular includes the actual image of Lyndon B. Johnson signing it, "with Martin Luther King right behind him."<sup>58</sup> The canvas that makes up the surface of the work was made in Greece, an intentional choice by Jackson as a comment on Greece as the birthplace of the type of democracy to which the United States has historically aspired. Incorporated into that surface is a broken-down sign from Andrew Gillum's run for governor in Florida, which of course would have made him the first Black governor of Florida. That particular race was

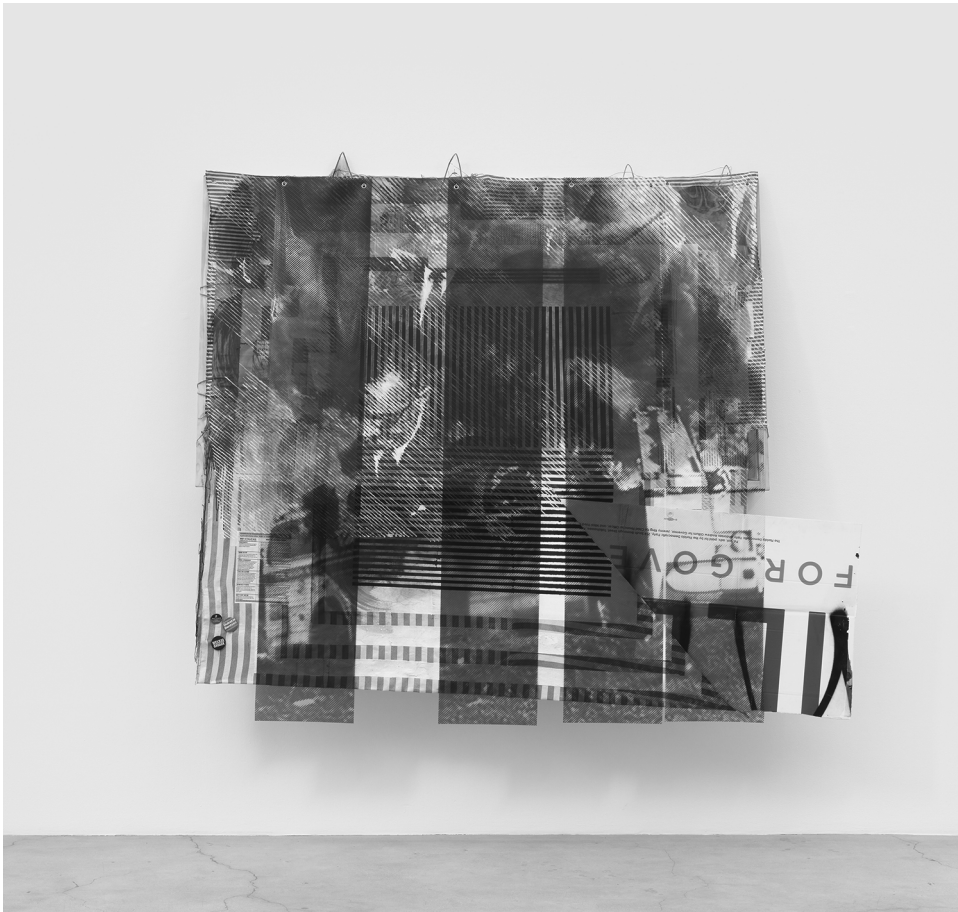
54. Puelo, "The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism."

55. Downton, "Ways of Constructing," 117–18.

56. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.

57. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

58. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.



**Figure 3.** Tomashi Jackson. *Ecology of Fear (Gillum for Governor of Florida) (Freedom Riders bus bombed by KKK)*, 2020. Archival prints on PVC marine vinyl, acrylic paint, American campaign materials, Greek ballot papers, Andrew Gillum campaign sign, paper bags, Greek canvas, Pentelic marble dust 91 × 100 inches (231.1 × 254 cm). Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery. Please see the online edition of *Art Documentation* for a color version of this image.

tense until the end, as after Gillum conceded the race, “more absentee ballots were counted in the following days and the margin between the two men narrowed to within the 0.5 percentage point necessary to trigger a mandatory recount under Florida law,” prompting Gillum to withdraw his concession.<sup>59</sup> On top of all of that is an image of the Freedom Riders bus that was bombed by the Klu Klux Klan in 1961. A “study in blues” as Tomashi refers to it, this is a piece that is steeped in research and feeling, as well as layers of meaning. But at the heart of this work is the idea that for Black Americans, “attempts at democracy is always just a gradient away from extreme violence.”<sup>60</sup>

59. Jessica Taylor, “Democrat Andrew Gillum Concedes Florida Governor’s Race to Ron Desantis,” National Public Radio, November 17, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/17/668321180/andrew-gillum-concedes-floridas-governor-s-race-to-ron-desantis>.

60. Tomashi Jackson (artist), in discussion with the authors, July 27, 2020.



**Figure 4.** Tomashi Jackson. *Ecology of Fear (Gillum for Governor of Florida) (Freedom Riders bus bombed by KKK)*, 2020. Archival prints on PVC marine vinyl, acrylic paint, American campaign materials, Greek ballot papers, Andrew Gillum campaign sign, paper bags, Greek canvas, Pentelic marble dust 91 × 100 inches (231.1 × 254 cm). Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery. Please see the online edition of *Art Documentation* for a color version of this image.

To say that Tomashi Jackson is a researcher as well as an artist would be an understatement. Jackson’s methodology is rooted in diligent inquiry, command of material combined with a nuanced comprehension of iconography in material, and a sense that she was born to ask questions. Her work reveals this to viewers, as they pull back the layers in an attempt to feel what the images present. The bedrock of Jackson’s practice is dialogue, and the hope to understand the human condition, particularly the lived Black experience, as it connects history with contemporary struggle.

## CONCLUSION

The works of Carmen Winant and Tomashi Jackson demonstrate the difference between knowing and understanding, as well as the practice and the culminating physical work as vehicles for understanding. As Jackson states in the quote that begins this article, “My work isn’t simply an intellectual escape . . . my work is work . . . and I’m just trying to understand the world around me.”<sup>61</sup>

Librarians who serve artists are privy to the process of artmaking at its core and inception. What Winant and Jackson share is a holistic picture of what it is like to investigate the world through making. The research and subsequent knowledge reveal themselves to the artist and viewer through the act of gathering, observing, putting together, and then ultimately, looking closely and feeling. The practice of art making itself is holistic and research-driven, down to the choice of material that constitutes the work. Art librarians, therefore, are not simply conduits to books and items in special collections (as perceived by some outside of the profession), but also collaborators with networks of people, as well as advocates for new tools and understanding. Going forward, the literature on how art librarians might serve artists in their research endeavors must more aptly reflect the work that art librarians actually do and how artists benefit, as well as more accurately underscore the multi-pronged lines of inquiry pursued by artists, within and outside the library.

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