# Research as Art (as Curriculum)

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## Introduction

This essay focuses on a 4th year course, titled *Search/Research/Resolution*, that I have developed at the Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto. First taught in 2002, the course is held over a fourteen week semester each fall, with one three hour class per week. It is offered within the photography area at OCAD in recognition of photography's lengthy history as a form of "evidence." The course endeavours to contextualize this role of photography, which leads to a focus on interdisciplinary activity, particularly in relation to artists' utilization of installation formats that often have included photography. The course is concerned not so much with simply imparting research methods as it is in foregrounding the complex place of research in the practises of contemporary artists. It is my belief that research methods can be effectively learned through looking at how they are embedded in artistic practise. As with attempting to familiarize students with theoretical concepts, linking research to actual practise can help them more quickly understand how one can lead to the other or even be a form of art practise in itself.
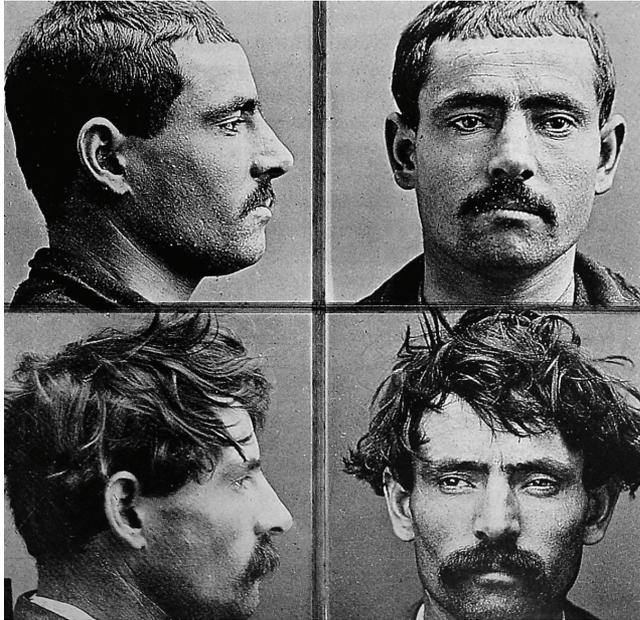
**FIGURE 1.** **Alphonse Bertillon**

Anthropometric photograph,
Paris préfecture, c. 1890

In this essay I would like to do the following: briefly examine what is meant conventionally by the term "research"; identify the influences that led to the development of the course; examine the relationship of the course to my own artistic practise; highlight aspects of the course content; and, finally, offer some examples of the work that has been produced by students in response to the final assignment of the course.

## Research?

What is meant by the term "research"? My aged copy of the Oxford dictionary defines it as the "endeavour to discover facts by scientific study, [the] course of critical investigation" and a "careful search *after* or *for*" something. It is something one "engages" in. Such a definition of research seems clearly rooted in the development of the scientific method of investigation [1] as rationalized over the past few centuries. Research is the intentional and methodical gathering of factual information with the intent of establishing, supporting or refuting a theory or proposition. Within this definition research is not seen as a goal in itself but as a process that makes possible an end product.

Photography was invented and used as a technology for the faithful reproduction of reality that, significantly, led to it also being a catalyst for the birth of the archive [2]. Not coincidentally, these developments occurred concurrently with the positivist advance of the sciences in the 19th century. The photograph's evidentiary force, based on its indexicality, was seen as beyond question for much of the history of the medium. The use of photography as a tool for research and categorization has thus been seen as one of the main pillars of its identity. From its very beginnings, photography has embodied the idea of research, being perceived as a means to an end in its mode as document. The popular conception of the photograph is not only as an index of its referent but also of what can be seen as its default mode as "record". It is only when aesthetic expression was considered as an intention that the entire photographic image — rather than the discrete, factual information it supposedly contained — was seen as worthy of attention. While there are bodies of photographic work where factuality and artistic expression have been brought together – the documentary photography movement, so-called "street" photography, etc. — it is accurate to say that documentary evidence and aesthetics have had an uneasy relationship since

photography's first years. Generally speaking, the aesthetic attributes of what are considered as documents have tended to be ignored or suppressed in favour of a rationalist reading of such images. Over the past two decades, this ambivalence has been exploited in an ironic manner by a number of astute artists [3].

## The Artist as Researcher?

To see "research" as a part of artistic practise at the beginning of the 21st century is not a startling insight. What has changed, however, is the way in which what has traditionally been seen as an information-gathering process meant to support the finished artwork has been made a subject of art in itself in some work (with a variety of goals in mind). There is a trajectory to that recognition of process as subject. It moves from seeing art as pure expressivity to the acknowledgment of the "preparatory" work necessary for the production of an artwork to, more recently, the foregrounding of the research process itself as form. Expressionistic views of art may still be prevalent but, if one follows the above trajectory, it means eventually to come into conflict with essentialist views of the motivation and production of art. The recognition of the research process within the *Search/Research/Resolution* course places in relief beliefs in an unbridled subjectivity – i.e., concepts of the artwork as a product of spontaneous, emotive "genius" (a concept that ignores the socio-economic circumstances that make art production possible). It is not to deny a role for intuition in art but to provide an expanded and more interconnected context for it. In my own experience, research is a process – a search, in fact - that has the potential to produce unexpected subjects due to the richness of the material one can encounter while engaged in this process.

A common form of the understanding of research in relation to art production tends to situate it in a supporting role to the "main event", the finished artwork. In this mode the relationship is similar to that found in scientific methodology where research precedes and supports a thesis or proposition but is considered as separate from the end product. Research in this application in art is seen as the preparatory process for the production of the artwork – such activities as considering and comparing material and processes, gathering historical information in archives, reading secondary source materials, etc. In such cases research remains defined conventionally as a means to an end. The research component usually remains invisible in the final version of such works. For example, in traditional documentary projects, whether film, video or still photo, where an impression of objectivity is desired, the research process leading to the finished work tends to be effaced, seen as an as unwanted intrusion and a sign of subjectivity.

The conceptual turn of the 1960s and 1970s in contemporary art has been especially influential in terms of developments around the role of research in art. Artists during this period took research one step further, not only acknowledging it as part of their work, but often, making it the substance of the artwork itself. The research process becomes the artwork itself for a number of artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Mel Bochner, Victor Burgin, Sophie Calle, Dan Graham, Douglas Heubler, John Hilliard, Mary Kelly, Bruce Nauman, Ed Rushcha, and Jeff Wall. The work referred to here dominated early conceptual art practises mostly dating from the 1970s. It often utilized a presentation form composed of some combination of text and photography that read as a kind of "note-taking" or "report", often with no discernible end purpose. More recently, the work of artists such as Mark Dion, who blends archaeology and art in a self-reflexive form, or Nikki S. Lee, who inhabits the anthropological concept of "participant-observer" in her work, continue to foreground as art research methodologies appropriated from disciplinary fields not normally seen as related to art.

This idea of highlighting the research process itself by artists has effects on our understanding of art. The heavy emphasis on process-oriented work situated art within a productive continuity that, as noted, conflicted with theories of the spontaneous eruption of genius prevalent in art since the 18th century. As well, our general reliance on forms of supposedly objective evidence—lens-based, written, oral, etc.—was itself a target of critique for many conceptual artists who identified and manipulated in a self-reflexive manner the signifiers of "proof" very effectively. Such attention to epistemological issues and the questioning of the originality, authenticity and the nature of creativity itself was a hallmark of such conceptually-based work.

Tony Godfrey, in his 1998 survey of conceptual art noted that, "Conceptual art has had the widest possible effect on how photography is used in art, because it does not take the medium as a given, but as something whose mechanisms and use have to be analyzed." [4] While this is true, one can also turn this statement around and say just as correctly that it is photography that has had a profound effect on art, which is what Walter Benjamin famously argued in his much-cited artwork essay [5]. As Godfrey implies, many conceptual artists were interested in using photography to critique the uses of photography itself, including the high modernist path that art photography had taken in the post-war John Szarkowski era [6]. However, for some artists the interest in the medium lay in utilizing the very qualities of photography that were seen as attractive by scientists in their positivist pursuits – i.e., photography's descriptive capacities and its inference of an indexical relationship between photographic subject and reality. While notions of objectivity and neutrality were often trashed by conceptual artists, at the same time they often employed photography's descriptive, documentary capacities in the carrying out of their work. This dialectical capacity of the photograph to be both disbelieved and believed, to be discredited as subjective and yet utilized as if it wasn't, has continued to offer much fodder for contemporary artists.

## Post-documentary Practise

My own art practise matured in the decade from approximately 1986 to 1996. It certainly drew upon the lessons of 1970s Conceptualism's skepticism about photography's neutrality, its use of existing research methodologies as new forms for art, as well as postmodern theory that concerned itself with questions of subjectivity and identity. While rooted originally in photography my work increasingly took on an interdisciplinary form that expressed itself in the amorphous form of installation. This developed in order to critically tackle what I perceived as the limitations of documentary photography practise at the time by, in a sense, "extending" or attempting to reinvent that form through working across a variety of media – sculpture, text, photography and video.



**FIGURE 2**                               **Vid Ingelevics**
*Archive*, 1996

I produced three installation works in that decade: *museum of a man* (1987); *Places of Repose: Stories of Displacement* (1989); and, *Alltagsgeschichten: some histories of everyday life* (1994). Each drew heavily on research that I conducted using primary and secondary sources. For example, in *museum of a man*, I collected and used media accounts of the story of an amnesiac, researched the pathology of amnesia, and was formally inspired by Frances Yates' seminal book on the history of "remembering", *The Art of Memory* [7]. In *Places of Repose* my interest in issues around memory and history became more personal as I turned to the story of my own family as displaced persons who were forced to flee their Latvian homeland in 1944. Here I carried out many hours of taped interviews with family members, visited and photographed in Latvia for the first time as well as southern Germany where my family spent the immediate postwar years in Allied displaced persons camps. The *Alltagsgeschicten* work continued the more personal exploration that had commenced with *Places of Repose*. It also raised the bar regarding the acknowledgement of the place of research in my work to a new level in that I constructed an interactive "research station" within my installation. Consisting of a table, chair and a functional but transparent filing cabinet made of Plexiglas and steel (a structure made invisible in order to be visible), the cabinet contained all of the material – texts, maps, images – that I had gathered in researching the sites of the displaced persons camps that were the subject of this installation. I visited archives in Augsburg, Germany and at the United Nations in New York to research the histories of these camps as well as visiting and photographing extensively three former DP (displaced persons) camp sites in Germany in Augsburg, Bad Wörishofen, and Munich. Exhibition visitors were invited to "research" my research by using the files in the transparent cabinet. In 1998 a catalogue for this exhibition was coproduced by the Toronto Photographers Workshop and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography [8].

These projects were all exhibited nationally and internationally as there was a considerable interest, especially in Europe, in the permutations of the idea of what might constitute documentary practise in an era so skeptical of the kind of unmediated truth that it once promised without question [9].

It is with this history of doing intensive research around my photo-based installation projects coupled with a fairly positive reception to my interests in post-documentary developments that I came to teaching. My early teaching experience consisted of a sessional replacement at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1992, and a part-time position teaching a class at Sheridan College for a couple of years in the mid-1990s. In 1997, I was hired to teach in the photography area at the Ontario College of Art and Design, where I have been since, now teaching classes in Photography as well as Criticism and Curatorial Practise and, most recently, a new interdisciplinary course that straddles the art and design areas at OCAD.

From my first year at OCAD I was aware that the kind of research-based inter-disciplinary practise that I had been engaged in for more than ten years was not being explored anywhere in the OCAD curriculum. I was not simply looking for a reflection of my own work but had observed what I saw as an international trend towards an increasingly self-aware use of research in contemporary art practise (with Fred Wilson's 1994 project, *Mining the Museum*, seen as seminal in this regard). As well, I felt it was important to follow the links of these current practises to earlier forms of conceptual art that appropriated research models based in the life and social sciences. All in all, it seemed pedagogically a fertile territory that was not being brought to the attention of students as a coherent movement in contemporary art. Fortuitously, in 2001 a need was felt to update and balance the curriculum in the photography area at OCAD by adding more seminar-style courses that took a concept-centered approach to contemporary photographic practise. As I had been thinking about the subject of the role of research in art for several years by then I was able to quickly prepare a proposal for such a course. It was accepted and first ran in the fall of 2002.

## Search/Research/Resolution: Course Content

### Course Descriptions

Research can be defined as a process of information gathering with the goal of transforming it into a form of knowledge accessible to others.   Such a definition can be seen to apply to an increasing number of artists' practises as much as it does to the conventional sciences and humanities. This class is meant to explore the idea of "research" specifically as it relates to artistic practise. What roles does research play in contemporary art? From where are artists' research methodologies drawn? Do research-based artists' practises encounter the same ethical dilemmas that occur in other disciplinary fields?

### Learning Outcomes

Students will learn to understand research as a methodological approach to create content for artwork and as an artistic practise that highlights its own process as an artistic form.   This will broaden artistic options available to students for their future work. Students will learn about relationships between photo-based art practise and the use of photography as a research tool in other disciplinary fields (criminology, anthropology, archaeology) thus providing insights into those fields as well as photography as art. [10]

In this section I would like to highlight some of the content of the Search/Research/Resolution course. Above I cite the Course Description and Learning Outcome as they appear in the most recent course outline that students received. Here the course description identifies the interdisciplinary goals of the course and essential concepts around research-based art practise. The vehicles for this exploration are relatively conventional – lectures, films, a course reader, visiting professionals, assignments and much discussion.

The course is structured to examine the ways that research is utilized in contemporary art within a context of historical and current instrumental uses of photography for recording purposes. The course begins with a presentation that examines past uses of photography as the medium of "evidence" par excellence. It includes c. 1840s photograms of plants by Henry Fox-Talbot and Anna Atkins, J. Lamprey's ethnographic studies, Alphonse Bertillon's typologies of criminals, Jean-Martin Charcot's documentation of his work with female "hysteria", motion studies by Jules Etienne Marey and Edweard Muybridge, Eugène Atget's studies of Paris, Karl Blossfeldt's formal plant studies and ends with Harold Edgerton's experiments with stroboscopic photography in the 1960s.



**FIGURE 3**
Students visit Royal Ontario Museum photography studio, 2003

At the centre of the course is the artist's practise. Contemporary artists' research-based practises are looked at in relation to the idea of the archive. Are they producers, utilizers or some combination thereof? While many artists work with a variety of research methods in practise, I make a determination as to whether they tend to work mainly with primary or secondary research sources in their work (or even within individual projects). Following from this I present the work of a number of artists based on this distinction over the first few weeks of the class. For example, in discussing artists whose practises tend to engage primarily in first-hand research, I show works by Hans Haacke (the paradigmatic research-based artist), Sophie Calle, Marlene Creates, Mark Dion, Stan Douglas, Walid Raad and Nikki S. Lee. Artists whose work tends to mine the archive (a secondary source) would be Shimon Attie, Milutin Gubash, Fred Wilson, Spring Hurlbut and Mark Lombardi. A sub-category and an area that is given special attention within the course is the work of artists who deal with their own family histories, often requiring a combination of first- and second-hand source research. Here I might show the work of artists such as Vera Greenwood and Wendy Oberlander. One can note that in the preceding lists of artists some produce artworks supported by research (like Haacke, Creates, Attie or Lombardi) whereas others make the research process part of what is at issue in their work (like Calle, Dion, Lee, Raad, Wilson or Hurlbut).

Another site of research within the arts that the course recognizes is in relation to the relatively recent advent of the hybrid notion of the artist/curator (or, when the initiative comes from the art historical field, the curator/artist). Here the course examines the boundary-blurring work of contemporary "curators" such as Andrew Hunter, Jens Hoffman, David Wilson and his Museum of Jurassic Technology and Michael Fehr, former director of the of the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum, all of whom produce exhibitions that occupy a difficult to define space between the artist's installation and the conventional art-historically

based show. What characterizes their presentations is often a self-reflexivity around curatorial work that exposes the research that underpins their projects or takes the very workings of the institution as its subject.

Two other important vehicles through which the course highlights research practises are field trips and visitors to the class. The Royal Ontario Museum photography studios have been one site of such trips.  As well, at least one class per course every year is held at the City of Toronto Archives, where students are introduced to archival materials and research possibilities in the context of a discussion of artists who use such resources. Visitors to the class have included contemporary Canadian artists whose practises are deeply research-based such as Jim Miller, Gwen McGregor and Vera Greenwood. Also, I have invited experts from fields that use or intersect, in some way, with lens-based imagery. These include diverse areas that have a strong research basis such as anthropology, sociology, and even estate appraisal (where one often encounters the dilemma of the un-captioned family photograph). As well, I have invited manufacturers of surveillance equipment who provide the technology for a particular kind of "information" gathering to speak to my students about the state of their art. My intention is to allow students to become familiar with uses of photography that may begin to suggest previously unconsidered possibilities for their own practises. As I have discussed earlier in this essay, the appropriation of investigative models by contemporary art practitioners that are based in fields outside of art is a not uncommon characteristic of the development of conceptualism in art. And, again, at the core of many of these non-art practises is a research orientation that includes the use of the lens-based image.

**Research to Practise: student projects in the OCAD library**

The final aspect of the class that I want to discuss in this essay is the main assignment given to the students. This project asks the students to consider an exploration of the physical space and functions of the Ontario College of Art & Design Library in order to propose an art project that is specific to that site. They are not obliged to do so and may simply put up photographs related to their 4th year Thesis work, but, significantly, at least 70-80% of the students each year choose to engage with the library. It is important to note that the generally successful outcome of this assignment has much to do with enthusiastic support from key library staff who wish to encourage a sense of the library as not simply a generic resource but as an engaged and dynamic part of the school. Some of the librarians have, in fact, voluntarily involved themselves in the critiques of the student work - carried out in the library, of course. They provide a valuable perspective on how successfully the works have intersected with the library's functions. As well, the presentation of the students' work is advertised to the school community as an exhibition. The students themselves title the exhibition and produce a poster. This provides extra incentive for the students to think carefully about their research and production as the exhibition draws visitors to the library from the larger OCAD community.

Another significant aspect of this assignment is that it is not specified that students must bring a photographic resolution to their work. While a good number do, it is interesting to see that there are always a few students who decide to work in sculptural or installation formats. This may reflect the fact that a reasonable percentage of the artists' works that students have seen during lecture presentations have not necessarily been photo-based. On the following pages is a selection of the student work. Each installation view is accompanied by the student's name, date of the work, and a brief description of the piece.

**FIGURE 4**  **Elizabeth Sullivan**

Ontario College of Art library, 2004

Sullivan photographed a number of photography books from the library from all sides. She then produced prints to the scale of the original books and applied them to the surfaces of cardboard boxes made to the same scale. Sullivan placed magnets inside boxes that allowed the simulated books to be affixed magnetically to the metal surfaces of the library shelves thus seeming to defy gravity.

**FIGURE 5        Fiona McLaughlin**
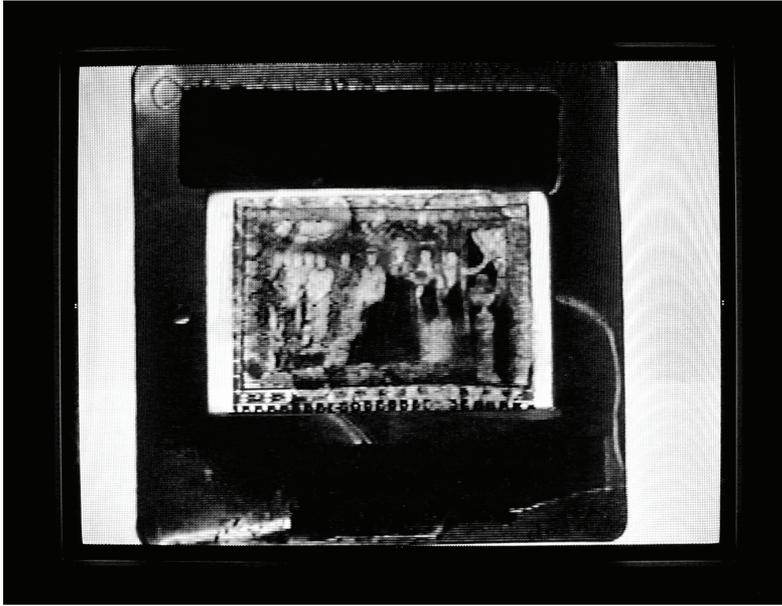
Ontario College of Art library, 2003

**FIGURE 6** **Fiona McLaughlin**

Ontario College of Art library, 2003

McLaughlin came across slides of artworks that were being thrown out by the OCAD library. She took these slides, placed them on a light table and video-taped the process of their destruction through the application of drops of bleach. The work has a prophetic quality as the use of 35mm slides at art schools and within the art world in general is quickly being displaced by the use of digital image files.

**FIGURE 7          Andrew Ferreira**
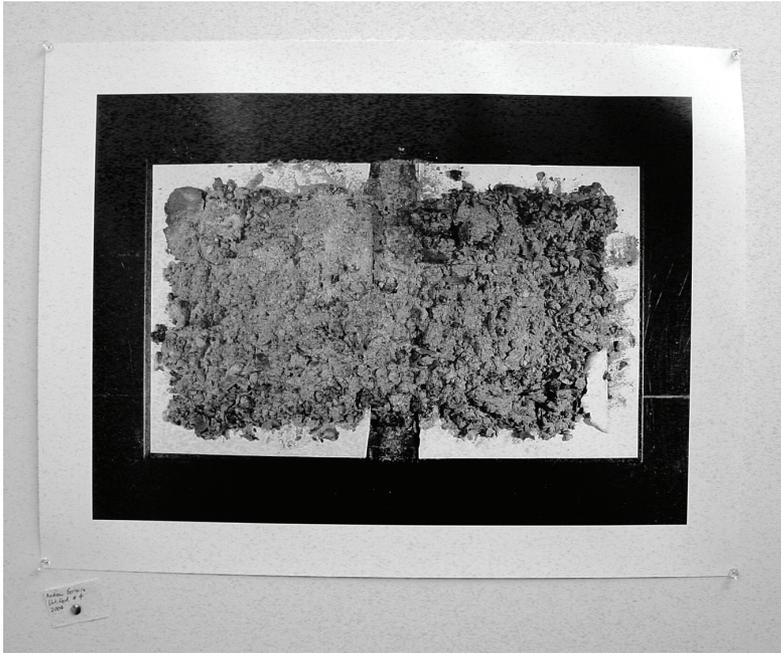Ontario College of Art library, 2004

**FIGURE 8**      **Andrew Ferreira**

Ontario College of Art library, 2004

Ferreira bought books from second-hand stores such as Goodwill. He then burned the books, photographed the ashes and then interred them, so to speak, in Plexiglas boxes that were placed on the shelves of the library. They were also accompanied by photographs showing the accumulation of ash laid out on the book's covers.
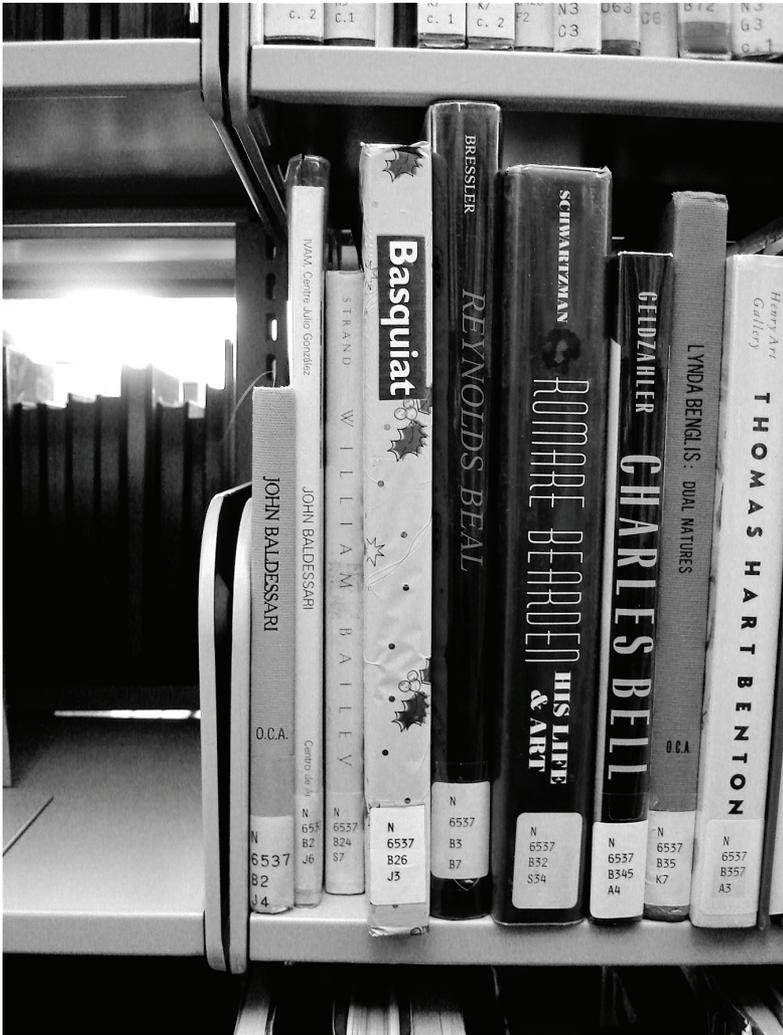
**FIGURE 10          Woo-taek Yang**

Ontario College of Art library, 2006

**FIGURE 11**              **Woo-taek Yang**

Ontario College of Art library, 2006

Yang not only worked site-specifically but also seasonal-specifically. As the library exhibition occurred in December, Yang decided to gift wrap the books of the artist Christo, who himself is famous for "wrapping" architectural structures. After researching the library's procedures and discussing his ideas with library staff, he made sure that the books remained in circulation. Titles, bar and reference were applied to the surfaces of the wrapping paper in the same spots they would normally be found on a book thus retaining the functionality of the library's processes. Anyone taking out the books was obliged to unwrap them as a kind of Christmas present.
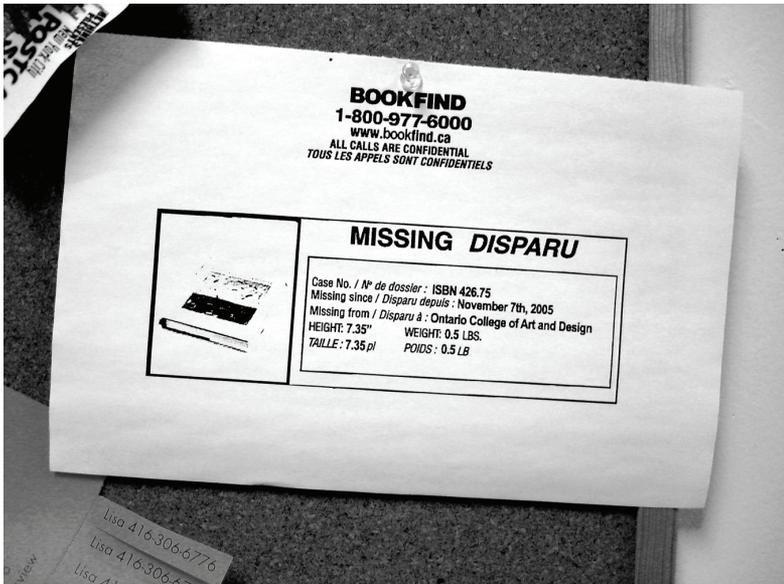
**FIGURE 9              Kara Kirsh**

Ontario College of Art library, 2006

Kirsh created a set of leaflets for books missing from the library. She researched the library's data base to indentify books that have been overdue for a long time or have completely disappeared from the library. She then used the model of the lost child message found on milk cartons to fabricate her letter-size leaflets, which include the website of a fictitious company that she created called "Bookfind". These leaflets were put up on bulleting boards throughout the school, including, of course, the library.

In closing, one of the primary goals of the Search/Research/ Resolution course has been to de-mystify relationships between works of art and the processes by which they are made. This has been done by highlighting the important place of research in contemporary artists' practises as well as by acknowledging the historical contexts out of which such practises have developed.  The course has been well received by students and other faculty, judging from a combination of personal feedback, OCAD's online course evaluation process (which produced the delightful comment that "Vid made me realize that research can be fun!") and responses to presentations about this course in more academic settings centred on pedagogical issues. It is my belief that the students have appreciated and benefited from the conceptual challenges of the course to more conventional ideas of art production, the exposure to the working methods of inter-disciplinary artists with whom they may not have been familiar, the discussion around the increasingly influential role of the archive in contemporary art and, not least, the opportunity to put their ideas into new forms through attempting their first site-specific works.

-end-

## Endnotes

1  "Scientific method" is a body of techniques for investigating phenomena and acquiring new knowledge, as well as for correcting and integrating previous knowledge. It is based on gathering observable, empirical, measurable evidence, subject to specific principles of reasoning (as defined by Wikipedia as of March, 2007).

2  Alphonse Bertillon (1853–1914) invented a classification system in 1879 to aid Paris police organize the police photo files of criminal types as a response to the crises of order and accessibility that had been created by a rapidly expanding collection of photographic images that had no easy pathway through them.

3    In 1977, Larry Sultan and Howard Mandel published the book, *Evidence*, which contained 50 photographs culled from a wide variety of institutional archives in the United States. Presented without captions, the lack of context and the resulting near-impossibility of discerning their motivation shifted attention to the aesthetic values of the images. Interestingly, this exhibition has recently been revived and re-presented with a new accompanying publication.

4    Godfrey, Tony, *Conceptual Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, pg. 301.

5    Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1968. The essay itself was first published in German in 1936.

6    John Szarkowski was the curator of photographer at the Museum of Modern Art, New York from 1962 to 1991. He was interested in promoting photography as a modernist art form, which meant searching for the purest possible expression of the photographic medium. This purity was based on attempting to locate photography's "essential" characteristics rather than defining the medium through its social uses.

7    Yates, Frances A., *The Art of Memory,* London, Melbourne and Henley: Ark, 1984.

8    Ingelevics, Vid, *Alltagsgeschichten (some histories of everyday life),* The Toronto Photographers Workshop & The Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1998.

9    My work has been exhibited in a number of European museums, galleries and festivals whose common theme was a reconsideration of documentary practise in a postmodern context. Some examples would be invitations to the Fotobiennale Rotterdam in 1990 and 2000, and inclusion in the touring group exhibition, *Real Stories*, that opened at the Museet for Fotokunst in Denmark in 1993 and toured throughout Europe for several years afterwards.

10   Ingelevics, V. (2002) *Search/Research/Resolution*. unpublished curriculum syllabus.