

The Artist-as-Researcher: Notes on Entanglement, Relational Knowing, and the Messiness of Process

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Abstract

This essay explores the figure of the artist-as-researcher as a contemporary embodiment of polymathy, particularly within non-Western contexts and frameworks of knowledge. Challenging the ideal of the solitary genius – and with it, mastery, and objectivity – the text centres entangled, relational, and intuitive modes of knowing as practiced by artists working across disciplines. Drawing from the author's personal and editorial work, including research on Pakistani modernist Zubeida Agha and collaborations with artists Bani Abidi, Usman Saeed, and Khalil Rabah, and gallerist Umer Butt, the essay foregrounds practices that resist institutional expectations or linearity. Instead, it proposes a polymathy rooted in complexity and built relationships. The artist-as-researcher emerges as an inadvertent political figure, operating across archives, ecologies, and collaborative infrastructures. This model embraces intuition and failure, offering alternative frameworks for thinking about research, authorship, and artistic labour in the 21st century.

Keywords: Artist-as-Researcher; Knowledge Production; Art and Nation-building; Museology; Artist run spaces; South Asian Art; Palestinian Art