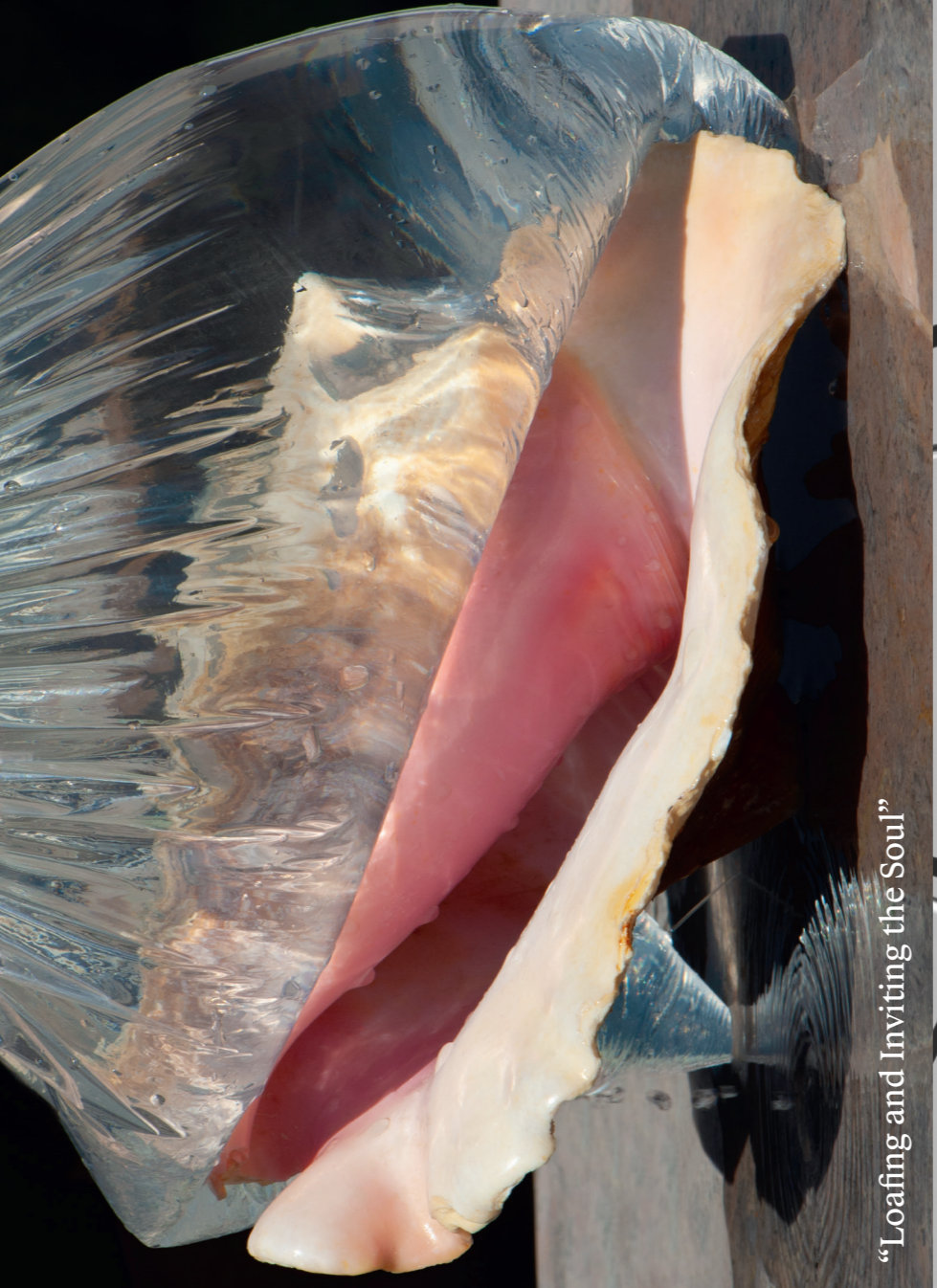


Re-Organizing the Things That We Think  
We Already Know



“Loafing and Inviting the Soul”



*What is Research?*  
BGC X MacArthur

Fall 2019, New York  
Edited by Peter N. Miller

A conversation with Amie Dorsen, Elodie Ghedin, Tom Joyce, An-My Lê, Hideo Mabuchi,  
Campbell McGrath, Peter N. Miller, Sheila Nirenberg, Terry Plank, and Martina Rustow



Persistent Driving



Close to the Core of the Human

# WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Edited by PETER N. MILLER

Published by BARD GRADUATE CENTER

## WHAT IS RESEARCH?

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Series: BGC×

Editor: PETER N. MILLER

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Art Direction and Design: EUROPIUM and JULIA NOVITCH

Cover Photography: EUROPIUM

Typeface: Common Serif by WEI HUANG

Published by BARD GRADUATE CENTER

Printed by PRINTON in Tallinn, Estonia

Distributed by UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

ISBN: 978-1-941792-24-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020943811

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New York, NY 10024

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## ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

BGC× publications are designed to extend the learning period around time-based programming so that it may continue after the events themselves have ended. Taking the spontaneous alchemy of conversation, performance, and hands-on engagement as their starting points, these experimental publishing projects provide space for continued reflection and research in a form that is particularly inclusive of artists.

This book is an edited record of the conversation series titled “What is Research?” that took place at Bard Graduate Center in New York during Fall 2019. The program gathered a group of artists, scientists, and humanists—all MacArthur Fellows—for three evenings of discussion, featuring Annie Dorsen, Elodie Ghedin, Tom Joyce, Hideo Mabuchi, Campbell McGrath, Peter N. Miller, An-My Lê, Sheila Nirenberg, Terry Plank, and Marina Rustow.

“What is Research?” was supported by an X-Grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Fellows Program. We are grateful to the foundation for its interest and support and, in particular, to Krista Pospisil for her care and attention to this project.

Special thanks to James Congregane, Kate Dewitt, Amy Estes, Leon Hoxey, Jocelyn Lau, Dan Lee, Kristen Owens, Hellyn Teng, and Maggie Walter.



Courtesy of Jackson McGrath. Doorway, New York, NY. Digital photograph.

*Campbell McGrath*  
At the Ruins of Yankee Stadium

*It is that week in April when all the lions start to shine,  
café tables poised for selfies, windows squeegeed  
and fenceposts freshly painted around Tompkins Square,  
former haven of junkies and disgraceful pigeons*

PETER N. MILLER: Bard Graduate Center (BGC), which is celebrating this year its 25th birthday, is a graduate research institute. We have MA and PhD programs; we have an exhibition gallery; we publish a monograph series, *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, and two journals, *West 86th* and *Source*; and create digital projects through our digital media lab. Research is the matrix that binds all these activities together and mutually informs them, and so research is something that we think about all the time.

Which brings us to the really astounding point that research is not something that the scholarly community thinks much about. In the global economy of knowledge, research is the thing that drives everything. The estimate is that over a trillion dollars is spent annually by governments, the private sector, and educational institutions on research. To take one easy, low-hanging piece of data, there are, as it turns out, about 164 million items in the Library of Congress' catalogue. But if you search under the subject heading "Research—History," you will find 43 items (or at least that was the number last night when I checked). Even if that subject listing is notoriously spotty, I think we can say that it's still a remarkably low number for a subject of such great importance.

Research is what we do; it's what we think about; it's how we evaluate ourselves. But nobody studies it or thinks about it as a thing. It's our cultural blind spot. And cultural blind spots, when you can find them, are *always* worth studying. The absence of attention, the taking of something for granted, can speak volumes about a society.

We are asking this question, "What is research?" precisely in order to light up this blind spot. We think it's important. And not just because it's what we do at BGC or because of the huge amount of money committed to R&D. Research is important because it's at the heart of the modern world. Almost everything associated with science, technology, and our human self-understanding has exploded in the last 150 to 200 years because of research. Forget about planets visited or nano-landscapes explored. Research has

transformed how we go about thinking about thinking. If, in the past, that kind of cultural definition and self-definition was mediated through priests and backward-looking tradition, in the modern episteme we systematically march into the future armed with our one-tool-to-fit-all-problems: research. If everything points to research, I think there's an argument to be made that research also points back out to everything. Let me explain. Think about the kind of personal and intellectual virtues you need in order to do research. There's persistence, determination, imagination, organization, self-criticism, love of truth, collaboration, communication, and long-term vision. If we step out of the archive or the laboratory, we might see these same virtues as describing not the excellent researcher but the excellent human being—or at least one kind of excellent human being. Mapping the epistemic virtues associated with research—or in simpler terms, recovering the meaning of research for the researcher—also means uncovering a vision of human excellence. We could even see it as a political vision, since the idea of a democratic citizen—and this takes us back to Jefferson's notion of the importance of a training in the liberal arts in the new United States—requires many of these same skills in arguing, collaborating, and pursuing truth in a self-critical sort of way. (I'm not going to do more than underscore the question I've just posed, implicitly, about the relationship between research and the liberal arts, but it could be said to go to the heart of the broader question about the relationship between teaching and research that has vexed the university for the past 200 years.)

One more point about this portrait of research we are sketching: it's actually much more about question-asking than answer-giving. And this is where we have to bring in some history. The antiquarians of early modern Europe, who began the process of putting back together the Humpty Dumpty of the ancient world—and whose object- and text-handling methods were soon taken over by historians and then farmed out among the newly minted humanistic disciplines of the 19th century, such as art history, archeology, anthropology, and sociology—are acknowledged as the first

to do research on the past. They excavated, both in the dirt and in dusty archives. What they had was curiosity—and in spades. It was their mark, and it filled the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammern* that have inspired contemporary artists from Joseph Cornell onwards.

As an aside—and I just can't resist—this was such an ingrained association, at least once upon a time, that when Marcel Proust wanted his readers to understand what a lover's passion really looks like, he described the desire to know every square inch of a lover's body with the antiquary's endless curiosity for, and I'm quoting, “the deciphering of texts, the weighing of evidence, and the interpretation of old monuments.” Not necessarily the first comparison that might now come to mind, right? But Proust did signal in the very title of his book that what we think of as research could, on the individual level, be very close to the core of the human experience. (If *recherche* in French can also mean “search”, *chercheur* means “researcher”—so the ambivalence should be seen as productive.)

But as much as this kind of curiosity may have led the antiquarians to do research, what we call research is not the same as curiosity. Curiosity is in it, but research is different. Curiosity in the researches of people like Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), to take one example I happen to know well, went out in all directions. Modern research is focused by the question that it asks. The question helps draw a line between what we need to know and what might be nice to know, but which we don't need in order to answer our question.

War made the 20th century *the* century of research. The Second World War played a key role. Think about space research and everything that's spun off of it—all the civilian applications. That came right out of work on captured V-2 rockets begun immediately after the war and—it needs to be said—with captured Nazi scientists. But we've also lost something in this translation. In 1930, in Hamburg, two German scholars published a two-volume work that was a history of research institutes, along with short reports written by members of 65 institutes, along with 10 international surveys, in

the humanities and sciences. In 1934, in Vienna, the young Karl Popper published a book on research in the sciences with the title *Der Logik der Forschung*. But in 1959, when the book came out in English, its readers—and given how important the book was, that’s a big number—encountered a work with the title *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*! “Research” had disappeared. Thinking about research was fully now assimilated to thinking about scientific method. A scholarly generation later this process is so far along that research isn’t even noticed when it’s done by scientists. So, if you go to Latour’s *Laboratory Life*, which is his deep ethnography of what goes on in a laboratory—it happens to be at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, maybe the most important research institute in the world from an architectural point of view—he never once turns his roving brain to the notion of research, even though he’ll talk about the scientists there as researchers doing research. The whole book is an ethnography of the research process, but he never stops to ask about research. For him it’s laboratory science that he sees in front of him. Not research. It’s that blindspot again.

It is in this spirit of question-asking, then, that BGC kicks off an inquiry—which will end with an exhibition in our gallery in 2023—with a conversation. And who better to introduce us to the meaning of research than a group of people who are our culture’s heroes of research? We’ve gathered nine MacArthur Fellows as our panelists for this discussion. They include artists, humanists, and scientists. We’ve brought them from these different backgrounds because at the beginning of our inquiry we’re not going to presume that there is only one kind of research. We can’t answer the question “What is research?” until we know more about the whole spectrum of research. Nuance really is the key. As Aby Warburg, one of BGC’s patron-scholar saints once said, “The dear god is in the details.” We might add to it today: “... in the conversation.”

I.

PETER N. MILLER: Let’s begin by asking our panelists to say a few words about their own work as it relates to research. And then we’ll start asking some questions.

AN-MY LÊ: I’m a photographer, and I have made work that’s mostly drawn from my autobiography. I’m Vietnamese-American, and I came to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 when I was 15. I first was trained as a biologist and had plans to go to medical school. I ended up working in a research lab, and did get into medical school. But then I discovered photography and made the switch, and my work is a little bit like a scientist, but also as an artist. It should be interesting to think about research in that way. I think that my work requires a lot of research, and I use the word research in a very broad way. It’s about getting access.

In the early ’90s, Vietnamese-Americans were able to return to Vietnam when President Clinton renewed relations with Vietnam. So, I was able to go back to Vietnam and photograph there. The next project that I did had to do with the memory of the war, and being the photographer who likes to be there and photograph in the real world, the only thing I could find that would satisfy that question and that subject was to photograph Vietnam War re-enactors. I’d gain access to that group and work with them. And as I was finishing, we invaded Iraq, and I think this idea of the consequences of war—the idea of the effect of war—really was extremely distressing to me.

I wanted to go to Iraq but was not able to become an embed, so I found a way to photograph the Marines who were training outside of Los Angeles. At Joshua Tree [National Park], I thought the landscape was really exciting and similar to Afghanistan. So, I went there and photographed them, and it turned out to be something interesting. Because you didn’t have to deal with the devastation, and