Portrait of the Artist as An Information Seeker – A Diagnostic Interview

Jessica D. McClanahan

Emporia State University

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Abstract

This paper examines and explains the information-seeking process and behaviors of visual artist living and working in and around New York City. The information need of the practicing artist differs from that of any other information seeker in that it is constant and almost never finished – there is no one question, and no one result that is sought out through a particular form of research and information retrieval. The body of work is organic; an ever-evolving being made up of concepts, questions, and answers developed by the artist to inform her practice. Through an interview using neutral questioning to evaluate the artist's methods of research, as well as the underlying concept with which she defines her work, I use Myers-Briggs testing and the information-seeking model developed by Krikelas to explain her process.

Portrait of the Artist as an Information Seeker: A Diagnostic Interview

Discussion

One of the most important things in an artist's practice – besides the production of work – is the research she does to inform her concept. In his paper, *An Empirical Study of the Information-Seeking Behavior of Practicing Visual Artists*, William Hemmig (2009) states that, "Little is known about the information-seeking behavior of practicing visual artists; what research exists has focused largely on art students, art faculty and librarians, although an untested model does emerge" (Abstract section, para. 1). To provide an example of this unknown group, I interviewed Cortney Andrews, a 28-year-old photographer and film artist living and working in and around New York City. Cortney has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography and New Media from the Kansas City Art Institute and a Master of Fine Art in Photography from the Rhode Island School of Design. She has exhibited her work across the United States, was an artist-resident in France, and also writes for various publications, including *Bitch* magazine, and much more (Andrews, 2011). Overall, Cortney is the very definition of a successful, up and coming visual artist. In Cortney's interview, she stresses the relevance of all types of information that she receives, although it rarely is found in a library (personal communication, February 12, 2011).

Background and Personality

Although Cortney Andrews currently resides in New York, living fast-paced city life, she comes from quaint beginnings. Cortney was born and raised in Emporia, Kansas, "a small town with one high school, one middle school, etc.," and lived, "outside of town in the country"

(Andrews, personal communication, February 12, 2011). When asked if she thinks that her art

stems from her upbringing, she replied,

> Absolutely. As an artist, I believe, as any human being, we find out how much our
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> upbringing influences many of our behavioral patterns, relationships, and decisions as
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> adults. I think growing up in a small town, and growing up very fast, left a huge mark on
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> my life. The pain, isolation, abandonment, and self-destruction I experienced, I still
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> struggle with today. It is at the root of who I am and how my identity formed, and it will
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> find its way into everything that I create. Even the palette, fabrics, and style of my
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> childhood home are constantly reflected in my work (personal communication, February
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> 12, 2011).

I used the Myers-Briggs Personality Test provided by Humanmetrics.com to evaluate

Cortney's personality in order to better understand her patterns and tendencies. Her results

showed that she was an INFJ, the most rare of all the personality types, occurring in only 1% of

the population (BSM Consulting, Inc., 2010, para. 2). Most INFJs base their reactions on

feeling, while taking in most of the information they receive intuitively (BSM, para. 1).   A good

example of Cortney's INFJ personality is in her explanation of the value system she uses to

determine the importance of her research: "If it is affecting, in some way, I know that it is

important, because if it can stir a powerful reaction in me then it can affect other people as well"

(personal communication, February 12, 2011).

Nature of the Information Need

Because Cortney's need is not urgent, nor does it come from a specific question, I tried to

ask questions about her work, concept, and research process, so that the reader could better

understand what a person in her profession looks for in the information she comes across. Cortney defines her topic of interest as,

> Sexuality and identity from a female perspective. Who and how we desire, how we want to be desired and loved, how one's own identity is constantly shifting to reflect those desires, and how we deal with the failure to reach those desires (personal communication, February 12, 2011).

Obviously, this sort of definition of topic or need might send some information professionals running the other way because it is rather vague and extremely personal/subjective. This topic, however, is discussed and demonstrated extensively in books, films, visual art, journal articles, dance performances, and every day life, and is the subject of many philosophers', artists', and writers' life works. Someone looking for this sort of information might have more trouble filtering out information that is of value to them rather than seeking it out specifically.

Search, Process, and Retrieval

Cortney admits to doing most of her research online, and most of that is done in order to find information about books, which she then finds at bookstores, and then decides whether to purchase them or not (personal communication, February 12, 2011). She also looks online for films and images, and says, "…I usually have to purchase them from overseas, download them via a bittorrent site. Images are more difficult because often they can only be found in specific libraries that are not located in my city" (personal communication, February 12, 2011). Cortney also says that she has not used a library in quite some time, the reason being that she feels her topic of interest stems from "recent pop culture or sources," implying that these sources are not available in libraries (personal communication, February 12, 2011).

In Hemmig's (2009) survey of artists, research showed that they required many different types of information, not necessarily in relation to art, and that they were hesitant to discount any one source as totally irrelevant (Discussion section, para. 3-6). Cortney confirms this when describing her research:

> But for my own visual sources, I consider almost everything I do to be some kind of research, even my daily interactions with people – the topics I discuss with someone over dinner, the man screaming at everyone on the train, my best friend's relationship and infidelity – this is what makes life, and I am interested in how people interact and deal with situations, what makes them tick, what hurts them, etc. (personal communication, February 12, 2011).

The fact that Cortney, like the artists surveyed by Hemmig (2009), seems to find information relevant to her work in almost everything she perceives, experiences, and does in everyday life, supports what Donald O. Case (2006) describes as the "serendipity factor – the seemingly accidental discovery of relevant information" (p. 32).

In order to evaluate Cortney's (and the artist's in general) search process, an important information-seeking model to apply in this case would be that of Krikelas, as presented by Case (2006):

> The Krikelas model [figure not included] thus claims to be a general one that would apply to 'ordinary life.' At the top of the model (implying a beginning) are the twin actions of 'information gathering' and 'information giving.' The activities of information gathering come about in response to deferred needs, which in turn have been stimulated by an event or the general environment of the seeker (p. 125).

The Krikelas model focuses on, among other things, the "potential for an information seeker to retrieve an answer from their own memory or those of nearby persons" (Case, 2006, p. 124). This information retrieval from informal sources, talking with friends, for instance, is directly manifested in the research practice of an artist. Inspiration can come from many different sources, not just books, and one is neither more nor less relevant than the other.

Art could also be directly applied to this model, since the artist is constantly flowing between her roles as an information seeker and an information giver. One could even argue that she is both seeker and giver simultaneously since the viewer's reaction to the work could also inform the work in the future. Like artists, "individuals are typically both senders and receivers of information… neither role is independent of the other" (Case, 2006, p. 126).

Possible Improvements on the Research Process

While reviewing Cortney's answers throughout the interview, I kept trying to think of ways that her research process could be improved. While she didn't mention any real barriers in particular, the one thing I could not ignore was her dismissal of libraries as a source for recent, up to date, and/or pop culture sources. It is a common misconception that libraries are simply antiquated institutions that house dusty old tomes and archives, however, in addition to keeping safe the historical archives of a community, the library's and library professional's role in the community is to provide their patrons with access to the most up to date technologies and resources. Cortney mentioned in the interview that she used to search academic databases, but no longer has access to them since she graduated. According to their websites, the New York Public Library (2011) and the Brooklyn Public Library (2011), both give access to hundreds of online databases. Both libraries also provide Interlibrary Loans, where patrons can request any book that is not currently owned by their libraries and borrow a copy. Both NYPL (2011) and

BPL (2011) also have many eResources, such as AudioBook Mp3s, eJournals, and eBooks, as well a 24/7 online chats where you can ask a librarian your question any time of day! The Brooklyn Library (2011) in particular has a program called, "Book a Librarian," where patrons can book a free half hour session with a librarian in order to be better served in regards to their information need.

Although I can personally understand the desire to buy and own a book, I think that by discounting the library as a valuable source, Cortney is limiting the possibility of gaining new resources, and even saving some money.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to pinpoint a specific information need and/or research method for a practicing artist, it is extremely important for information professionals to be aware of this group of people.

Visual artists have made a highly elusive community of information seekers, both in the library and information science literature and in library practice. Artists have been described as verbally uncommunicative, textually inept, and 'not easy to get hold of' (Stam, 1995a, p. 21), a 'phantom' community that uses libraries yet goes unnoticed (Oddos, 1998, p. 18), a community that can '*get by* without libraries' if the libraries do not satisfy their needs (Pacey, 1982, p. 37), and yet there are more artists in the United States, for example, than there are lawyers (Cobbledick, 1996) (Hemmig, 2009, Introduction section, para. 1).

While someone like Cortney would be wise to add libraries to her long list of important sources, information professionals should also be aware that people like Cortney are out there, who might have open-ended inquiries, and who are looking for a large variety of different

sources, both visual and textual. Librarians are particularly adept at searching quickly through

vast amounts of information and finding what their patron wants to know (I know this from

experience using an online chat function through my library) and should be considered no less

than an amazing resource. Cortney's work as an artist is always evolving; her imagery conjures

up many questions, uncertainties, and feelings within the viewer. Each piece informs the next,

and she uses this art to work out all of the thoughts and visions inside her head. When asked if

there will ever be a point when she can consider her research finished, she stated quite simply,

"No, it will continue always" (personal communication, February 12, 2011). As Cortney's work

evolves even more, so will her search process, and she will continue to inform and be informed

in countless ways throughout her lifetime.

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Appendix A

Diagnostic Interview Questionnaire
Cortney Andrews, Interviewed by Jessica D. McClanahan

Section 1: Information Seeking Experience

1. When you are doing research for your work, what kinds of sources do you look to first?

I look online for books that are related to the topic, and then I will go to the bookstore and look at before deciding if I want to buy them. I look online for related articles. I also spend a lot of time looking for films and images. If I can't find them in the US, I usually have to purchase them from overseas, download them via a bittorrent site. Images are more difficult because often they can only be found in specific libraries that are not located in my city.
I also look extensively at footnotes from art history or theory books that I'm reading and find new information from those sources.

2. How much time, if any, do you spend in libraries? If you do go to a library, how likely are you to ask an information professional for help?

Unfortunately, I haven't been to a library in a long time because I feel so much of what I'm interested in comes from recent pop culture or sources.   If I go to a library, I will always ask for help if I need it.

3. What is your experience with the internet and online databases? Do you utilize advanced search options?

I do a lot of initial research online, but I usually go more into depth by buying a book. I used to have access to some academic online databases, but no longer.

4. Do you often find yourself talking to friends, colleagues, or family members when looking for new information?

Yes. I talk to everyone who might know something about the topic or who might know how to find information on that topic.

5. How much time do you devote to this research? Do you stick to a schedule?

I don't stick to a schedule generally. I am always looking at things, and reading things, and I often don't know where I am going to find inspiration. It could be found in the lyrics to a song,

the chapter heading of a book, a phrase from a character in a film, a piece of work I saw in a gallery, or an experience I, or someone close to me, has had. I have been researching artists for a website I am starting, so my research for this project has been regular, meaning a day or two every week. But for my own visual sources, I consider almost everything I do to be some kind of research, even my daily interactions with people—the topics I discuss with someone over dinner, the man screaming at everyone on the train, my best friend's relationship and infidelity—this is what makes life, and I am interested in how people interact and deal with situations, what makes them tick, what hurts them, etc.

Section 2: Research Topic

1. Since you practice ongoing research in order to inform your work as an artist, what kinds of filtering do you do, i.e. how do you determine the importance of the information you find?

I don't like to put things into a hierarchy of importance for visual research—it can come from anywhere and no one thing is more valid than another. But what draws me to something, is if it affects me. If it is affecting, in some way, I know that it is important, because if it can stir a powerful reaction in me then it can affect other people as well. Our basic needs are universal and I am interested in finding that threshold. In my work, if the viewer can see part of themselves through an image or video that I have presented to them, then I have been successful, especially if it is something that they don't necessarily won't to recognize about themselves.

2. What would you say is your main topic of interest?

Sexuality and identity from a female perspective. Who and how we desire, how we want to be desired and loved, how one's identity is constantly shifting to reflect those desires, and how we deal with the failure to reach those desires. Most explicitly, though, how love is inseparable from pain. Freud wrote extensively on the relationship between Eros and Thanatos as two conflicting drives inside of all human beings. He believed the drive for life, love and preservation was always related to the death drive, which continually seeks pleasure at all costs. Freud notes that we repeat our erotic disasters over and over and over again, despite our inevitable failure, and as a result, struggle with sadomasochistic tendencies. These themes are always reflected in my work, and while the images are beautiful, they are also full of the sorrow and desperation that this dynamic implies.

3. When did you first decide that this was what you wanted to make your work about?

When I took my first photo class, I started taking pictures of women that were my friends and setting up narrative scenes that commented on different emotions I was having. It was a space where I could work out all of things that were going in inside my head, by externalizing them through the camera, I could try to make sense of them in the images. It became more sophisticated in college, and even more so in grad school when I began using myself as the subject. But I always photographed women

4. How do you use the information you find interesting or important in your work? What kinds of ways do you incorporate it?

I use phrases, experiences or images that affect me in a conflicting way to generate my own visual image, using the site of my own body as the conflict. I am drawn to conflict and how it can be reflected on the body. I will stage different scenes based on something I find erotic, but it can never just be read on one level. So the staging of a scene may occur many times before I get it right, and where there is pleasure in eroticism it will always be tangled with a subversive comment, one that speaks to it's opposite: pain. I work to portray both an intimacy and honesty, but not without making the viewer aware of the potential vulnerabilities that are a result of that. Incorporating these ideas takes experimentation. If a find a phrase or theory that is inspiring (Freud's Eros and Thanatos drives) then I will try my best to illustrate it from my own vision and performance of it. Trying to perform an abstract idea, like love or desire, is a difficult thing, because it is subjective and there is no right answer or interpretation of it. I perform the idea based on how I understand it and how it affects me.

5. Since your artwork is ongoing and not text based, in what ways do you credit your sources?

I have credited artists in my titles.   I remade an image from a male Surrealist photographer, but from a contemporary and feminist perspective (ie, using my own body rather than a doll), and I titled the image "After Bellmer". That is a more direct credit, but I've credited artists in other ways in titles—"Carved into Roses" is the title of one of my images, which was taken from a Kathy Acker book. "Eros and Thanatos" is another title, and, as I discussed above, it is taken from Freud's theory of the same name.
I also discuss all of these sources more directly in my statement, specifically commenting on my influence from film, feminist film theory, and Surrealism, and I often use quotes from those sources.

6. Is there a point when you might consider your research finished?

No, it will continue always.

Section 3: Personal Background

1. Describe briefly where you grew up.

I grew up in Emporia, Kansas, a small town with one high school, one middle school, etc. I lived outside of town in the country.

2. Do you find that your art stems from that upbringing?

Absolutely.   As an artist, and I believe, as any human being, we find out how much our upbringing influences many of our behavioral patterns, relationships, and decisions as adults. I think growing up in a small town, and growing up very fast, left a huge mark on my life. The pain, isolation, abandonment, and self-destruction I experienced, I still struggle with today. It is at the root of who I am and how my identity formed, and it will find its way into everything that I create. Even the palette, fabrics, and style of my childhood home are constantly reflected in my work.

3. What is your first memory of research or libraries?

My first memory was in elementary school, we had a library session every week and our librarian we read us all kinds of different stories and teach us how to look up subjects in the card catalog. After, we would be able to pick out any books we wanted and check them out.
I also loved going to public library as a young adult. I remember my mom used to drop me off there and I would wander through aisles looking at titles and covers, and then just pick something up and read it. Coincidentally, one of those authors I randomly picked up, remains today one of my favorite fiction writers—Joyce Carol Oates.   I would do more in depth research as well, not just intuitive searching. I would hear about classics that were embedded in pop culture, and I wanted to understand why they were so influential. I realized that I wasn't going to learn about these authors in school, so I would seek them out myself—Shakespeare, for instance, or William Burroughs, or any number of poets including Sylvia Plath.