Commentary:
What is Research in the Visual Arts?

By *Marc Gotlieb, Ph.D.*
Editor-in-Chief Emeritus, *Art Bulletin*
Chair, Fine Arts Department
University of Toronto

"What is Research in the Visual Arts?"—so ran the question posed by a recent conference at the Clark Art Institute in April 2007. The conference theme seems particularly urgent, given the profound transformation in research practices set in motion by the digitization of archival and library collections, and the further assimilation of those collections to the subtle restructuring of information through the use of search engines and similar technologies. But the question posed by the conference did not really turn on issues of technology, or for that matter the role of research in the field art history. Academic art historians today might well think we know what constitutes "research." As a former Editor-in-Chief of the *Art Bulletin*, I can well attest that the journal's authors and readers take the idea of research as axiomatic—even as we might debate, quarrel, or transform our methods, interpretive strategies, or choice of objects. But the conference was intended to consider a more wide-ranging set of questions. The question posed was not "what is research" for the field of art history. Rather, it posed the question "what is research in the *visual arts.*" Framed in this way, the conference sought to unite the idea of research with a broad range of activities around the visual arts, including art history but also pedagogy and contemporary artistic practice. In an instant, the problem of research looks much different: no longer does it rest on questions of how research has changed, or why research matters to our professional advancement. Instead, the conference explored the changed *experience* of research for anyone engaged in the visual arts—a range of experiences that it tracked across domains that both intersect and diverge.

I do not propose here to summarize the proceedings, which will be published in due course. But it may be helpful, in the context of this journal, to say a few words about my own presentation. *The University of Tampa Journal of Art History* is devoted to the dissemination of exciting research and rigorous argument by a new generation of scholars and intellectuals in the visual arts. This at once professional and pedagogical focus is perhaps just the vehicle for discussion around some of the boundaries of the research enterprise—the boundaries between professional and amateur, between the reality of what we say as academics, and what we wish we could say or do in imagined versions of ourselves.

My service as Editor-in-Chief gave me a new and privileged vantage point on both professional research practices and non-professional research practices. By the latter I refer to the vast and uncharted domain of art historical writing by non-art historians, non-academics, or individuals only loosely or not-at-all connected to the academic world and its interpretive and publishing protocols. In part this world is a fictional one. Take the case of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, whose account of Leonardo, along with the heroics of the scholar who is the book's protagonist, captured the imagination of millions of readers. To be sure, the account of art historical research or scholarly activity that Dan Brown presents for us is not a realistic one. The book's hero, Robert Langdon, is a professor of "religious symbology"—a field the book treats as central to art history and humanistic discourse but a field that does not exist. The fact that this kind of "symbology" resembles a simplified version of iconography—a "method" that still today functions as the art historian's Other might well make us still more fearful of the account of research the book details. But inaccuracies and mischaracterizations are not the point. Rather, the point is that this outsider domain of art historical research serves as a brilliant vessel for what many of us sometimes might wish being an art historian actually entailed. The research associated with "outsider art history" may sometimes produce, rely on, or even recycle strange, misguided, or outdated hypotheses. Further, in outsider art history, the researcher imagines him or herself to make not a trivial but a profound discovery—typically the laying bare of a secret structure, symbol, a tomb, or identity held to lie at the core of that work's meaning. No less significant is the evidentiary rhetoric common to this discourse. Researchers operating in this non-field seize upon evidence neglected, ignored, or seemingly suppressed by the mainstream, often through the deployment of technical expertise unknown to or undervalued by the establishment.

This is not the place to detail examples—the *Da Vinci Code* is telling enough. But the popularity of the book should remind us that this domain is not to be despised but examined and even embraced. We may look askance as research—real or fictional—emanating from this domain makes claims that we would never permit ourselves to make. But that is also the source of its potential power and insight. In this unregulated terrain, free from the intellectual and professional police operation that is peer-review, we find ourselves saying, wishing, and indeed believing in claims that in our academic discourse we dare not make. Whether or not those claims are true or false is, at least for present purposes, not the point. In our own imagination of research, this kind of wishing and believing flourishes and takes place. It is fully a part of how we envision ourselves, even if it differs fundamentally from the research we actually undertake and choose to disseminate. Here the line

between the reality of academic research and our fantasy of it is difficult to draw—even as in our professional lives we imagine ourselves to be drawing it all the time.