

The Artist Interview: An interdisciplinary approach to its history, process and dissemination

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There is no history of the artist interview as a critical genre in its own right. Rather, it has been underplayed as a journalistic tool, or overplayed as a historical source, predicated on the authentic artist's voice. Since the Artists' Lives project was established in 1990, the artist interview has tended to be subsumed within the field of oral history and its established protocols, restricting opportunities for interpretation and minimising its performative and creative aspects.

This session instead positions the artist interview at the intersection of art history, critical practice and dialogic aesthetics. The artist interview exists in different formats, including scripts, live dialogue, audio/audio-visual recordings and transcripts. How does the existence of multiple, competing sources affect approaches to the archive, and disrupt the primacy of the visual over the aural in art history? Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the six papers examine the relation of the artist interview to such histories as broadcasting, publishing, experimental sound and music, linguistics, performance and recording technologies. The papers scrutinise the process of conducting and disseminating an interview, from pre-production to post-production, considering the ethics implicated in what is added, modified or censored in this process.

The session will conclude with a workshop that explores both documentary and performative methods for producing interview transcriptions.

Speakers and Abstracts

The Artist Interview: An elusive history

Reva Wolf (State University of New York at New Paltz)

The history of the artist interview is a tantalising subject, not least because of the breadth of associations with other histories that it involves and invites, such as of journalism, broadcasting technology, psychoanalysis, performance, and literature. Yet, exactly on account of this constellation of associations, it is a decidedly slippery subject, difficult if not impossible to grasp. In this paper, I discuss this impediment to the writing of a history of the artist interview – outlining the sheer quantity of material involved – and then offer some thoughts on how to productively move forwards. I take an historiographical approach, noting the ways the topic has been reinvented with each decade from the 1990s onwards. This pattern is visible in the conferences of our art history organisations and institutions, in panels held in 1996, 2004, 2013, and now, in 2019. By connecting the dots between these and other explorations of the artist interview, I propose that we begin to envision the writing of its history as a collaborative endeavour and offer suggestions for what form such a collaboration might take.

Both Sides of the Mike: Interviewer and/or interviewee

Clive Phillpot (Freelance Writer and Curator)

The speaker has had experience with the British Library Artists' Lives project, both as interviewee with Cathy Courtney, and as interviewer with Gustav Metzger. The various other interviews in which he has participated have been preserved in a range of formats, whether via regular recording equipment, email, or the postal service, and many have been published. His own most frequent interviewees have been the stateless artist and activist Gustav Metzger (1926–2017), and the American pop and mail artist Ray Johnson (1927–95). In addition to his ongoing interview with Cathy Courtney, two other substantial interviews with Clive Phillpot, employing very different methods, were recently published in *BOMB* magazine online. The first by Elizabeth Zuba (2014) was about his work with Ray Johnson, the second, by Ashley McNelis (2015), was about artist books.

The wide variety of means and procedures for documenting the words of the artist or subject will be highlighted, since many possible routes can lead towards a reproducible result.

From 'portraits d'artistes' to the Interviewer's Portrait: Interviews of modern artists by Jacques Guenne in *L'Art vivant* (1925–30)

Poppy Sfakianaki (University of Crete and Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FO.R.T.H.)

Between 1925 and 1930, when artists' interviews were still not a regular feature of the art press, the French art critic Jacques Guenne published a series of illustrated artists' interviews under the title 'Portraits d'artistes' in one of the most important Parisian art journals for modern art, *L'Art vivant* (1925–39). Treating the published interviews as fiction, i.e., the echo of the real interviews, in this paper I will critically analyse their texts and illustrations, comparing their original form with the edited reprints of a selection of them in a book that Guenne published in 1927. In this book, Guenne radically restructured the texts of several interviews so as to enhance their narrative capacity.

On the one hand, I will examine how the interviews, as a media event in a popular art journal, constructed the artists' public image, and increased their visibility in the public sphere and eventually the commercial appeal of their art. On the other hand, I will dwell on the role of Guenne in shaping and reshaping the interviews, which included long introductions and questions-statements. I will thus argue that the interviews also contributed to the construction of the public image of the interviewer and the promotion of his aesthetic ideal. This ideal – modest (*juste milieu*) modernism – was also that of the journal, whose co-director Guenne was. It is not by accident that in 1930 *L'Art vivant* organised an exhibition in Galerie Pigalle in Paris that comprised all the artists who had been interviewed by Guenne.

Artist Interviews & Revisionist Art History: African American Women Artists, Critical Practice & Methods of Rewriting Dominant Narratives

Lauren Cross (University of North Texas)

The field of art history features dominant and subjugate knowledge as well as seemingly countless new sites for analysis and discovery. As art historians continue to contribute new insights and interpretations, critical forms of inquiry have highlighted the importance of individual artist voices in order to democratise art-historical narratives that tend to be overlooked and to lay the groundwork for contemporary ideas. For US artists and scholars of colour, the lack of critical artist voices is often detrimental – perpetuating the ways in which communities of colour frequently feel excluded from knowledge-production that defines their experiences. In contrast, scholars across interdisciplinary fields propose that artist interviews, in particular, are important strategies for reinterpreting historical events (Jordan; Kreamer; Obrist; Walker; Whitehead).

In this paper, the researcher will analyse the audio/audio-visual recordings and transcripts for artist interviews with four African American Women artists and compare critical observations between conducting and distributing artist interviews for documentary film, oral history, qualitative research and publishing. The paper assesses the potential for artist interviews to be critical sites for reframing, reclaiming and rewriting art histories through the voices of those underrepresented within art history. The researcher will contribute practical strategies for producing documentary and performative interview transcriptions for creative work, reporting and research that allow artists to frame their own agency.

Afternoon session

Workshop

This afternoon session comprises two papers and a practical workshop, inviting delegates to transcribe a short extract from a recorded interview. We will compare the results produced by using different transcription methods, noting the advantages or limitations of each for use in various publishing, artistic and archival contexts. Please bring a device that plays sound, e.g. a laptop, tablet or mobile phone and also a set of headphones.

Speaking out: Split identities, politics and the ventriloquial voice in artists' film and video of the 1970s and 1980s

Claire M Holdsworth (Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London)

Speaking-out and listening-in are important modes of engagement that are both channelled and subverted in experimental artists' moving image, particularly in 'expanded' performance-based artworks made in the UK from the late 1970s to late 1980s. Drawing upon my experiences as an archivist, and recent post-doc research into the intersections between experimental sound/music and artists' moving image at this time, this presentation will consider the 'performative afterlife' of recorded material in relation to the archive. Discussing the 'split conditions' of the voice via sound theory, the paper will explore the dual balance between interviewing people from this time and exploring artworks that use the spoken voice, including visuals, audio samples and short clips relating to several example artworks, such as the work of the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG), among others. The 'performative afterlife' of recorded utterance and exploration of writings by Steven Connor (2000) and Mladen Dolar (2006) will frame re-examination of queer, feminist and activist histories, considering intersectional practices that are closely connected to the antiphonal dynamics of the artists' recorded voice. By exploring how artists have re-engaged with their work over time and re-entered conversations from and about the past, the paper will consider how history is translated by the mediums – whether written or technological – through which they reach us today.

Small lies? The ethics of the authentic artist's interview

Jean Wainwright (University for the Creative Arts)

In 2007, Matt Wrbcian revealed in 'The True Story of "My True Story"' that Andy Warhol never uttered his famous quote, 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol just look at the surface...'. Rather, the interviewer Gretchen Berg published in 1966 a carefully edited conversation transposing her questions into Warhol's statement, which became 'fact'.

This paper examines the ethical and art historical questions that are raised when conversations with artists are edited for sound clips or transcribed for books and catalogues. In the artist's interview, intentionality between the original interviewer and interviewee and the psychological, sociological and egotistical implications of what they 'say' raises questions for the legacy of an artist's practice. Should the reader of an interview be aware of how much has been 'tidied up' or redacted? Does it matter that what one is reading is a version of the authentic truth of the original?

Using four case studies drawn from my archive, I trace and demonstrate the significance of the editing process from the voice to the page: Warhol's *a, A Novel*, testing the lies of a literal transcription; Morten Viskum, re-scribing his psychological desire; Nathalia Edenmont, from controversy to confessional; and Alexis Hunter, reviving the voice.

With a personal archive of over 1,500 recordings with artists since 1996, I can revisit and reconfigure with the responsibility this incurs. The archive is at the mercy of the gate keeper, archivist or editor. Even a literal artist transcription can contain 'lies'. Does this matter?