

Commentary on the documents

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The four documents included in this issue are elaborations of the papers presented at the 2019 Annual Conference of the Association for Art History. As it is common practice at academic conferences, each paper in this session was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation, which permitted the playback of sound and video excerpts from original artist interviews. A faithful transposition of these multimedia presentations in the pages of academic journals is often impossible given their design constraints. Given the interdisciplinary approach pursued in the session of *The Artist Interview* (2019) and the experimental nature of this issue, the following presentations have been revised as textual/verbal documents of original sound and video archival material. While the written component of each paper is fully readable here, some of their original sound and video counterparts are located and accessible in archives or repositories where these documents can be preserved and accessed in the future.¹ The papers in this session acknowledge the multiple formats in which the artist interview exists, including scripts, live dialogue, audio/audio-visual recordings and transcripts.

The first document is 'Both sides of the microphone' by Clive Phillpot. The text included in this journal is a lightly edited version of the paper written for the presentation at the 2019 conference in Brighton, which Phillpot could not physically attend due to personal circumstances. In April 2019, prior to the conference, a recording of him reading his paper was made at his home in London by Lucia Farinati. This was played back at the conference and followed by a discussion with oral history interviewer Cathy Courtney. The text reproduced here can be read as the script of a special kind of oral history document. In retracing the history of seminal interviews in his life (sometimes as interviewer; at other times as interviewee), 'Both sides of the microphone' brings the reader back to the time when those interviews happened. It revolves around moments in time that punctuate Phillpot's personal life: work activities, friendships, job interviews. Anecdotal rather than analytical, Phillpot's account provides the reader with direct insights into the original context of each interview: how it was arranged, where and how the meeting took place. What emerges is an account of a specific art scene and network of people. Despite the fact that interviews have been often devalued as journalist tools or simply considered as oral sources, what Phillpot's contribution clearly shows here is that an interview is always a situated knowledge. The background information of these encounters, especially with complex personalities such as Gustav Metzger, is part of this knowledge. As in storytelling, the knot of memory is triggered here from details that might appear irrelevant, indulgent or too personal. Yet those 'irrelevant' or digressing details are what makes this account as vivid as Roland Barthes' *punctum* in a portrait photograph. In writing about the relationship

¹ The system of permanent links has been developed at the time of the revision of the papers thanks to the support of the University for the Creative Arts, London and the UNT Digital Library.

between oral history and storytelling, oral historian Alessandro Portelli observed that 'history has no content without stories'.² He eloquently writes:

... history, we had been taught, is facts, actual and objective events you can touch and see; stories, in contrast, are the tales, the people who tell them, the words they are made of, the knot of memory and imagination that turns material facts into cultural meaning. Stories, in other words, communicate what history means to human beings.³

The text published here can be read as a document that complements Phillpot's interviews housed at the British Library as part of the *Artists' Lives* project. In this sense, 'Both sides of the microphone' functions as the biography of these interviews, helping the researcher to re-trace the (un-linear) journey of these archival items. It also acts as a reminder of the various life cycles of the 'same' speech event as found in its multiple forms: written, recorded, vocalised and eventually edited.

Similar in scope but with a very different approach, Jean Wainwright's contribution 'Small lies? Authenticity and the artist's interview' narrates the background stories of two interviews she recorded with artists Morten Viskum (2015) and Nathalia Edenmont (2016). Wainwright unpacks the psychological scenario which constitutes the background of these two interviews. By comparing and dissecting the artists' statements recorded by her on several occasions, Wainwright acts like a detective delving into a past case in order to uncover the true facts about these interviews. Here, the original recordings, their transcripts, and their edited printed versions are brought together to illustrate the history of these specific interviews as well the discrepancies and continuities between them.⁴ However, rather than looking for contradictions in the artists' statements and following a heuristic scientific approach, Wainwright's investigation focuses on the relational dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. Her status as an experienced interviewer is clearly entangled in the process of making, publishing, and (now) narrating and analysing her interviews. Rather than hiding or minimising her role, the co-construction of the interview is presented here as a transparent process. While interviews often contribute to an artist's mystique – maintaining secrets about an artist and their work – the two examples reported by Wainwright proved the opposite. Both Viskum and Edenmont revealed to Wainwright the deeply personal stories that lie beyond their works. Although

² Alessandro Portelli, *Introduction: The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, viii.

³ Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, 42.

⁴ The audio excerpts presented by Wainwright include: Jean Wainwright and Nathalia Edenmont, extract from a recorded conversation at the Dunkers Kulturhus, Helsingborg, Sweden, 3 November 2016, duration 2 minutes 16 seconds ©Jean Wainwright and Nathalia Edenmont. You can listen to this excerpt at the Research Repository of the University for the Creative Arts: <https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/creators/Wainwright=3AJean=3A=3A.html> Jean Wainwright and Morten Viskum, extract from a recorded conversation at the New Hôtel Gare Du Nord Paris, 25 May 2015, duration 5 minutes 43 seconds. ©Jean Wainwright and Morten Viskum. You can listen to this excerpt at the Research Repository of the University for the Creative Arts:

<https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/creators/Wainwright=3AJean=3A=3A.html>

shocking and painful, what seems to converge in both examples is not so much what has been said by the artists, but how and where those statements were actually produced. Wainwright invites the reader/listener to reflect on the moment and space where certain questions were asked and addressed: that space of intimacy and trust built over numerous encounters with the artists in different places.

The very role of the interviewer here is that of creating the conditions for the artist to speak and to be listened to. The highly sensitive material shared and communicated through the various stages of the same interview eventually prompt both the interviewer and the interviewee to think about the ethics of the interview itself. But what indeed are the ethical responsibilities of interviewer and interviewee? Wainwright asks the question: 'What if the artist consciously lies to the interviewer, lies by omission or withholds information, can this also be considered to be their authentic "voice"?'⁵ What of the psychological manipulation or coercion of the interviewee? Wainwright admits to writing 'notes on typical therapeutic listening techniques in order to try and elicit the answers he [Morten Viskum] had until then eluded' – techniques that included repeating the interviewee's words and counting in her head in order to leave room for the interviewee to expand on the content.⁶

The threat of libel hangs over interviews. The decade-long libel trial brought against American writer Janet Malcolm by one of her interview subjects Jeffrey Mason in 1984 (relating to her book *In the Freud Archives*) stands as a cautionary tale; although she eventually won the case, her reputation suffered. Yet Malcolm refused to compromise her risk-taking. Her non-fiction book *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1989) begins with the proclamation that every 'journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible'.⁷

And indeed, what of the coercion of the interviewer? Magazine editor and curator Tim Griffin goes as far as to compare interviews to method acting, asking 'to what extent does the interview format itself invite "mechanical" or "rubber-stamp" acting?',⁸ suggesting, that it is in fact the artist who is busy manipulating the interviewee into believing in the authenticity of his or her answers. As an example, he recalls the humiliating experience of interviewing Jeff Koons on his first day as art editor of *Time Out New York*, when it turned out that Koons had already given an almost identical interview to the *New York Times Magazine*, resulting in Griffin's piece having to be pulled at the last minute.⁹

The importance of scrutinising the entire process of conducting and disseminating an interview, from pre-production to post-production, considering

⁵ Jean Wainwright, 'Small lies? Authenticity and the artist interview', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 23, December 2020, 4.

⁶ Wainwright, 'Small lies?', 12.

⁷ Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, London: Granta Books, 2018. The journalist of that title also wrote his own twenty-six-page rebuttal to what he calls Malcolm's 'wrongheaded and factually inaccurate ... attack on my journalistic ethics and me'. See <http://www.joemcginniss.net/after-22-years-my-rebuttal-to-janet-malcolm-goes-public/joe%20McGinniss>

⁸ Tim Griffin, 'Method Acting: The Artist-Interviewer Conversation', *Art Journal*, 64: 3, Fall 2005, 77.

⁹ Griffin, 'Method Acting', 72.

the implications of repeating or manipulating what has been said in a recorded dialogue, is something that has become fertile artistic terrain in the context of time-based practices, including video, performance and sound. In her illustrated paper 'Vocal acts: video art and the artist's voice', Claire Holdsworth offers two intriguing examples of artists using live and recorded voices as strategic elements in their own work. She analyses how the possibility of re-recording and re-enacting the 'same' speech through video technology is employed by artists Kevin Atherton and Catherine Elwes as a performative device in the presentation of the self.

Holdsworth's article combines text and images (video stills) in unpacking the use of the artist's voice in the construction of two works: Atherton's *In Two Minds* (1978) and Elwes's *Kensington Gore* (1982). *In Two Minds* revolves around a video self-interview which has been performed and re-performed by the artist since 1978. In each iteration he creates a live dialogue with past recorded versions shown on video monitors or as projections. *Kensington Gore* (1982) features different accounts of an accident Elwes witnessed, the same story re-told in as many ways as she could think of to create an 'acoustic collage'.¹⁰ Both approaches offer a reflection on the development of the 'interrogating form' and the 'interviews as a medium'.¹¹ Holdsworth situates these works within the critical debates of the 1970s and 1980s, around notions of expanded cinema, independent filmmaking and video art. She notes that both artists are creatively exploiting the feedback potential of video recorders, as described by Rosalind Krauss in *Video: The aesthetics of narcissism* (1976), in such a way as to go 'beyond mere documentation in the presentation of the performative self'.¹²

Holdsworth focuses on the sound component of the voice. She particularly addresses the split conditions of the recorded voice as a means for self-reflective dialogic artistic practice to emerge. According to Holdsworth, the re-evaluation of the dialogic narrative in the context of the expanded field of 1970s opens up the question of the 'afterlife' of the interview: its potentially creative re-use and re-location through the practice of re-enactment and re-recording. As she writes, 'The potential uses of an interview after it has taken place – its afterlife – make it a productive format for artists as well as critics or art historians.'¹³ But 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? As Holdsworth notes: 'The artist's voice is central in the interrogated medium as a mode of self-critique, contrasting with formal criticism, which asserts the authority of the critic over the artist.'¹⁴ These vocal acts therefore suggest 'a move away from the "critic" as a commentator, towards the self-producing, self-narration of art by artists, a shift that can be seen in the development of artists' writings from the sixties through to today'. What distinguishes criticism that stems from the artist's voice from that undertaken by critics who write about art is – according to Holdsworth – the fact that these vocal acts 'are dialogues in art'.¹⁵

¹⁰ Claire Holdsworth, 'Vocal acts: video art and the artist's voice', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 23, December 2020, 15.

¹¹ Holdsworth, 'Vocal acts', 2.

¹² Holdsworth, 'Vocal acts', 12.

¹³ Holdsworth, 'Vocal acts', 4.

¹⁴ Holdsworth, 'Vocal acts', 20

¹⁵ Holdsworth, 'Vocal acts', 20.

The use of the video interview as a means of critical and artistic practice has been further explored here by Lauren Cross in her multimedia presentation 'Artist interviews and revisionist art history: women of African descent, critical practice and methods of rewriting dominant narratives'. The article combines a written account with the presentation of an excerpt from her video work, *The Skin Quilt Project* (2009), an eighty-eight-minute documentary produced from nearly 100 hours of video-recorded interviews with over a dozen African American textile artists and quilters.¹⁶ Cross analyses the way in which the audio-visual recordings have allowed a number of African American women artists – including Carolyn Crump, Dorothy Montgomery, Brenda Kinner Sandles, Catherine Lamkin, Bunnie Rodriquez and Dr Carolyn Mazloomi – to discuss the 'ways in which skin colour politics are implicated in the production of their work and how participating in the African American textile traditions produces cultural pride and positive self-image'.¹⁷

Unlike Atherton's and Elwes' works, as analysed by Holdsworth, the production of this documentary is not purely a self-reflective tool through which the performative self is presented. *The Skin Quilt Project* is instead discussed as a method of self-inquiry which uncovers the 'counternarratives and subjugate knowledge present within communities of colour that might be overlooked within an interview with an artist otherwise'. In conducting her interviews Cross employs what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has termed the 'outsider within' perspective. She writes: 'By bringing my full experience and reality as a black woman to my interviews with other black women artists, our conversations become exactly what Collins describes as reflective of black feminist researchers.' This personalised – one might call it autoethnographic – approach is especially important, she argues, to avoid the kind of hegemonic discourse in which 'a small collection of artists are continuously used to describe the entirety of black womanhood'.¹⁸ Informed by the work of Lisa Farrington, Phoebe Farris, Leslie King-Hammond and Jontyle Theresa Robinson, Cross' article contributes to a reflection on art historiography from a black feminist standpoint.¹⁹ Cross claims that the artist interview is a potential critical site for reframing, reclaiming and rewriting art histories through the voices of those underrepresented within art history. But how can her approach be further expanded and/or applied to other contexts? Is the medium of video recording key to this process?

It has been noted that the history of interviewing is often associated with a degree of experimentation with the form and practice by those individuals with 'vulnerable claims to citizenship, whether because of their gender, race, creed, or sexual orientation'.²⁰ Rebecca Roach argues that interviews constitute subjects as well as audiences: 'In the era of decolonization and with the rise of identity politics,

¹⁶ This excerpt is hosted by the UNT Digital Library and can be viewed here: <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1725758/>

¹⁷ Lauren Cross, 'Artist interviews and revisionist art history: women of African descent, critical practice and methods of rewriting dominant narratives', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 23, December 2020, 11.

¹⁸ Cross, 'Artist interviews and revisionist art history', 10.

¹⁹ Cross, 'Artist interviews and revisionist art history', 11

²⁰ See Rebecca Roach, *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 17.

interviews have become a key site whereby these claims to citizenship are enacted.²¹ Nonetheless, interviews can be also used as ‘soft weapons’ (Gilliam Whitlock’s term), that is, ‘those life narratives that can help us attend to overlooked subjectivities but can as easily be packaged, promoted, and commoditized in a global marketplace’.²² In their influential study of Milan Kundera’s novel *Immortality*, in which they popularised the term ‘interview society’, Paul Atkinson and David Silverman also warn against the ‘ironic and unintended consequence if the proper attention to the voices of ethnographic representation [derived from feminist and postcolonial scholarship] were to reintroduce an uncritical view of the subject’.²³

The four documents each prioritise a different aspect of the artist interview: as a biographical method, psychological constitution, identity narrative and art itself. They attest to the importance of paying attention to the complex construction of interviews within specific historical and cultural contexts. While the popular image of the artist interview as a media event has often obfuscated the background history of the artist interview, the six contributions to this issue advocate instead for a deconstructive approach that unpacks and reveals the hidden narratives that each interview always carries within itself.

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²¹ Roach, *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*, 17.

²² Roach, *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*, 17.

²³ Paul Atkinson and David Silverman, ‘Kundera’s Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of Self’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3: 3, 1 September 1997, 322.