

The artist interview: an interdisciplinary approach to its history, process and dissemination

Preface

Lucia Farinati and Jennifer Thatcher

'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.'¹ So famously begins E. H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. By this provocation, Gombrich meant to remind his readers that artworks are 'not the result of some mysterious activity but objects made by humans for humans';² that is, their end form depends on a chain of decisions made by an artist. Sketches and artists' writing may offer clues to help demystify artistic process, but what of asking the artist directly? How much value should we assign to the artist's voice in relation to other sources of information and other interpretative frameworks? Was formalist art critic Clement Greenberg right to warn fellow critic Irving Sandler that '[N]o artist – like no public figure – should be taken at his own word. In the end you do yourself a disservice by that acceptance, however much it wards off what's called controversy'?³

An examination of the artist interview can offer new perspectives on the thorny issues of biography and intention – their relevance so disputed, particularly since the late 1960s, when Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida each declared the death of the author.⁴ Such a study straddles many art-related fields – including art history, art criticism, artists' writing, sound and performance art, critical and curatorial practices – reflecting the documentary and creative range of artist interviews. Outside art, it is useful to compare artist interviews with interviews as they have been developed in other disciplines, particularly journalism, linguistics, literature, psychoanalysis, criminology, sociology and anthropology.

This issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography* 'documents' a session we convened for the 2019 Association for Art History (AAH) annual conference, titled *The Artist Interview: An Interdisciplinary Approach to its History, Process and Dissemination*.⁵ By taking an interdisciplinary approach and responding to the overarching theme of the 2019 conference – 'art history and visual culture in the expanded field' – this session brought together six papers that examined the relation of the artist interview to such histories as publishing, recording technologies, performance art, video and sound art. Furthermore, the session aimed to stimulate a discussion on why there is no history of the artist interview as a critical genre in its

¹ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1992, 3.

² Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 12.

³ Letter to Irving Sandler following the latter's publication of *The Triumph of American Painting*, in Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: a memoir*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004, 213.

⁴ See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Stephen Heath, ed., *Image-Music-Text*, London: Mill and Wang, 1977, 142–148; and Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967. Some critics have since called for a 'return' of the author. See Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992.

⁵ Association for Art History Annual conference, University of Brighton, 4–6 April 2019.

own right, proposing that the interview's significance has been underplayed as a mere journalistic tool, as well as overplayed as a historical source predicated on the 'authentic' artist's voice.

One motive for convening a session at the AAH was to disentangle the artist interview from its close association with oral history, especially as the 2006 AAH annual conference (the last time the subject had been explicitly addressed at the conference) was titled *The Artist Interview: Contents and Contentions in Oral History/Art History*. This disentanglement is especially pertinent in the UK, where the *Artists' Lives* project, established by National Life Stories in 1990 and based in the oral history section of the British Library, has enjoyed much success at developing appreciation for the artist's voice as valuable historical source material. At the conference we argued that 'the artist's 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'. While this could be seen as a criticism of oral history projects such as *Artists' Lives*, the conference and subsequently this publication has rather been based on an appreciation of its idiosyncrasies, and a desire to value, and clarify the nuances between, diverse approaches to interviews.⁶

The artist interview exists in different formats, including scripts, live dialogue, transcripts, audio/audio-visual recordings and text-based performance. A particular artist interview may take several forms over time – altered in the process, as it is transcribed, edited, recorded, performed or re-performed. How, then, 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? The documents featured in this issue 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. Treating the life of the artist interview – rather than just the life of the artist – as an object of study in itself offers an alternative to the biographic model of interviews (as emphasised in oral history, for example). This approach expands the scope of the artist interview to include more creative uses, such as a form of artistic practice in alternative contemporary art magazines, or in performance, sound and video art.

What has been the impact of the artist interview on the way art history and art criticism have been written and interpreted? As Reva Wolf argues in her paper presented at the 2019 conference, the historiography of the artist interview is fragmented across many different fields of research and histories. The way in which the artist interview has been considered as a specific historical subject, shaping modern and contemporary art historiography remains therefore a 'slippery subject' with many unexplored questions. The relationship between the history of the artist interview and its historiography appears therefore like the chicken-and-egg question. Where to begin?

This volume analyses the reasons why the artist interview has been undervalued or even devalued as an object of study in itself. How in particular the advent of new recording technologies in the 1950s, and the development of conceptualism in art between the 1960s and 1970s had a direct influence in

⁶ We would like to thank Cathy Courtney, Project Director of *Artists' Lives*, for her invaluable insight into the *Artists' Lives* project and for accepting our invitation to the conference as respondent to the paper by Clive Phillpot.

gradually transforming the interview from a method of gathering historical, biographical source material into a performative, self-reflective creative object and methodology in itself. How, finally, these two extreme positions, the historical and the creative, might co-exist in the same period or even in the same author's work if one considers an eclectic figure such as Andy Warhol (as Wolf and Jean Wainwright do in this issue). Facing the impossibility of collating a unified global history of the artist interview, our task as editors of this volume is therefore twofold: firstly, to offer some background to the six contributions presented here; secondly, to explore the possible parameters for understanding the artist interview as a critical genre in itself. By critical genre, we include art-focused critical writing (e.g. art criticism, journalism, historical commentary), as well as other forms of critical inscription developed through art and curatorial practice in a variety of media and contexts.⁷ Given the interdisciplinary format of the 2019 session, including an experimental workshop on interview transcription, the present issue has also been considered and choreographed as an experiment in its own right.

The issue begins with an extensive introduction co-written for the journal, followed by two survey papers by art historians Poppy Sfakianaki and Reva Wolf. By taking a 'historiographical approach' Wolf's paper addresses the impediment of writing this specific history, noting the ways the topic of the artist interview has been reinvented with each decade from the 1990s onwards. Sfakianaki's paper, by contrast, takes us further back to the early history of the artist interview – 1920s Paris – analysing the interview as a media event in the popular art journal *L'Art Vivant* (1925–30). The context examined by Sfakianaki represents here a key moment in the modern historiography of the artist interview as a form of mediated, co-constructed narrative.

The second part of the issue brings together four contributions from the conference which have the character and function of textual/verbal presentations of audio-visual material. While academic conventions recognise the common use of written citations in critical writing, the issue of how to include audio and video references which also act as visual or aural citations remains experimental terrain. In this light, the critical contributions by artist and curator Lauren Cross, art historian Claire Holdsworth, writer and curator Clive Phillpot, and interviewer and art historian Jean Wainwright have been treated here as documents. They illustrate the main arguments of the 2019 conference while not necessarily or entirely subscribing to standard academic conventions. In their remit of using (and or creating) archival documents from artworks, personal narratives and first-hand experience of interviewing artists, these multi-media contributions contain links to original archival material presented at the conference and are, themselves, to be archived along with the archival material that they use.⁸ The issue includes a commentary

⁷ This might include hybrid forms of writing (e.g. art writing), self-reflective/performative artwork, video and audio documentary, and film and audio essay, just to name a few examples.

⁸ In putting together this volume the issue of how to provide permanent links to audio and video references from works which did not originally belong to a library or archive has been quite a challenge. We would like to thank the UNT Digital Library for now hosting Lauren Cross' work, and UCARO University Repository for hosting Jean Wainwright's article. A special thanks goes to Cathy Courtney and also Katrina Clifford from the Kingston University Repository for their guidance and support. Farinati would also like to thank her

which guides the reader through the material conditions of the production and dissemination of each document presented here.

In co-writing the following introduction and commentary as well editing this issue we have drawn from our doctoral research, respectively the study of *Audio Arts* magazine by Lucia Farinati conducted at Kingston University (2016–20); and the study of the artist interview's relationship to innovations in recording technology, different publishing forums and the evolving public for art, by Jennifer Thatcher at the University of Edinburgh (2017–).⁹ Instrumental in editing this issue has also been our own direct experience of being interviewers and writers for contemporary art magazines, and of developing a dialogic curatorial practice in the context of public galleries and museums, as well as curating independent projects and publishing initiatives.¹⁰

Lucia Farinati is an independent researcher, curator and a published author on the subject of listening, sound and activism. She was awarded a funded PhD from Kingston University on the subject of *Audio Arts* magazine in July 2020, exploring the activation of the *Audio Arts* Archive in collaboration with Tate Archive. She was an interviewer for *Audio Arts* between 2005 and 2007. She co-convened the session 'The Artist Interview' at the 2019 Association for Art History conference.

Jennifer Thatcher is an AHRC-funded PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh, researching the history of the artist interview. She publishes regularly as an art critic. She is also a public programmes curator (ICA, Folkestone Triennial, Whitstable Biennale). Five of her interviews with artists were published in *Talking Art 2* (2017). She co-convened the session 'The Artist Interview' at the 2019 Association for Art History conference.

PhD supervisor Fran Lloyd for her guidance and continuous encouragement as well as Kingston School of Art for the awarded Conference Fund Faculty to attend the 2019 AAH annual conference.

⁹ Lucia Farinati, *Audio Arts Archive: From Inventory Space to Imagined Space*, PhD, Kingston University, Dep. of Critical and Historical Studies, July 2020. Accessible at: <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/46708/>.

¹⁰ Lucia Farinati was an interviewer for *Audio Arts* magazine (2005–07). In 2017 she co-published with Claudia Firth *The Force of Listening* (Errant Bodies Press), a dialogic montage of interviews which investigates the role of listening at the intersection of art and activism, including conversations with philosopher Adriana Cavarero, the anthropologist Pat Caplan, the media theorist Nick Couldry, the artists and activists Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, Ultra-red, the Precarious Workers Brigade and the artist Anna Sherbany. Her research on dialogic practices and listening also developed from a series of curatorial projects exploring the relationship between site, sound and text, in particular Sound Threshold and her collaboration since 2005 with the artist William Furlong, co-founder of *Audio Arts*. Jennifer Thatcher has published extensively as a freelance critic since 2003, including interviews with artists Pablo Bronstein, Guerrilla Girls, Emma Hart, Mark Leckey, Tino Sehgal, Stephen Shore, Hito Steyerl and Danh Vo. Five of these interviews were published in *Art Monthly's* anthology *Talking Art 2* (2017). She was Director of Talks at the ICA, London (2003–10), during which she commissioned many live conversations between artists on stage, and co-curated the exhibition *Talk Show*, which examined the role of speech and writing in art. She has continued her interest in live conversations as a curator of public programmes for the Folkestone Triennial (2014; 2017) and the Whitstable Biennale (2016).



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