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# For the Record: [Un]Official Voices at the V&A

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This overview of the historical and affective value of oral history recordings draws on my current research on curators at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Questions about the changing definition of the title 'curator' over time but also about the way the oral history interview as a medium demonstrates this are raised. In telling of their lives, curators' agency is extended to encompass the construction of their *narrative identity*. The entanglement of the 'unofficial' and 'official' persona of the curator is revealed. Nevertheless, is it possible to disentangle this distinction? Is it even necessary? Or, is the personal voice the medium for reflecting and transmitting the multi-layered snapshots of experience, and that what engages is this very quality of the life lived as a story?

## Introduction

The UCL Paul Mellon seminar series 'Voices in (and around) the Museum' (2011) provided the opportunity to discuss and disseminate the current life history research on curators at the Victoria & Albert Museum. This report gives an overview of the historical and affective value of oral history recordings, also showing how the changing definition of 'curator' over time, is achieved through the medium of the oral history interview, a context which enables a form of self-reflection that throws light on the interviewees' individual and collective identity as curators working together in and for a specific institution. In telling of their lives, curators' agency is extended to encompass the construction of, what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1992) termed, their *narrative identity*, a temporal category captured by this research 'for the record' (amongst other uses). The interviews reveal the entanglement of the 'unofficial' and 'official' persona of the curator. Nevertheless, is it possible to disentangle this distinction? Is it even necessary? Or, is the personal voice the medium for reflecting and transmitting the multi-layered snapshots of experience, and that what engages is this very quality of the life lived as a story?

## Preserving the Voice

Visitors are increasingly as intrigued by what goes on behind the scenes in museums as they are by the displays and exhibitions 'front of house'. I draw on the analogy with theatre since it conveys how mostly unknown individuals, who invisibly direct the performance of the objects in their collections, are responsible for creating publicly perceived ideas about museums. While curators may become known through their publications and lectures, these are the 'official' narratives that confirm the institution's didactic function and identity (figure 1). Equally out in the public domain are the statements that promote exhibitions and collections; most recently, for instance, The British Museum/BBC Radio 4 programme 'The History of the World in 100 Objects'. This is the legitimate 'voice' of the



**Fig. 1:** The Victoria & Albert Museum, circa 1930.  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

museum. However, as one V&A curator commented: 'But there is another level only you see'.

Launched in the autumn of 2009, the CCW/V&A oral history project<sup>1</sup> has focused principally on the history of curating at the V&A through the life stories of curators both retired and in post. From those who entered the profession in the years following the end of World War II to more recently appointed staff, the project has so far undertaken thirty recordings, including also a few with senior but non-curatorial staff.<sup>2</sup> The premise of the project is to understand what a curator *is* through the medium of personal life histories, enabling interviewees to describe and reflect on their working lives. Once completed, the recordings will be deposited in the V&A Archive where they will be made available to researchers, subject to the interviewee's consent and deposit instructions which may contain restrictions and embargoes since as soon as they are in the Archive, the interviews will assume the patina of 'official' record. Although it has a thematic focus, the project draws its strength from the multivalent content that life histories produce, as they shift between performance-oriented narrative, content-oriented document, subject-oriented life story and theme-oriented testimony (Portelli 1997; Sandino 2009). While some institutionally or personally sensitive material will remain under embargo

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until a date specified by the interviewee, at the other end of the confidentiality spectrum, there are also funny and/or enlightening accounts ['the most exciting find ever!'] about what goes on behind the scenes, some of which will be available in due course on the V&A website as audio extracts and transcripts.

Voice, as the noted oral historian Alessandro Portelli remarked, is the trope that marks out oral history as a method dedicated to capturing and preserving individuals' commitment to recollecting the past, creating narratives with a specific communicative function: *history-telling* (Portelli 1997: 24). Museums, however, rely on visual engagement and the primacy of seeing. The ear was once defined as a passive organ, contrasted with the 'swift, actively selective eye... always an organ of exertion, labor, and concentration; it grasps a definite object' (Eisler and Adorno 2004 (1947)). The reliance on visuality is challenged by aural history which relies on the imaginative capacity of listeners and narrators' ability to communicate their reminiscences. 'High fidelity', the phrase associated with the RCA Victor phonograph, reflects how the early history of sound recording and transmission was driven by the search for increased accuracy of reproduction (Sterne 2003). The very fragility of sound, the problems of misunderstanding through the failure of communication systems (including language itself) meant that accurate reproduction was a driving force of sound research.

Concurrently, the emerging technologies of sound reproduction changed the activity of listening and what it was possible to listen to (Peters 2000; Sterne 2003; Toop 2010). The most affective outcome of sound reproduction, of course, was and continues to be, its ability to transcend space and time, particularly evocative in the context of museums, which are also sites of multiple temporalities. Through traversing their own individual time/space configurations, curators' oral histories also extend the temporal horizons of their institution, their voices echoing through the imaginations of those who listen to their stories. The affect of oral history is, of course, dependent on the context of listening; visitors who listen in (and around) the Museum, or those who know it, will have a different engagement with the sound archive, than those who don't. This may be one reason for using moving image technology. However, audio engenders the illusion of intimacy and the condition for thoughtful reminiscence; we hear memory-in-process as curators describe their pasts:<sup>3</sup>



**Audio clip 1:** Betty Elzea (Circulation department, 1956-71). Courtesy of the V&A Archive, ©Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

**Betty Elzea:** That reminds me too of the V&A rolling protection of the worthwhile things of the nineteenth century. I don't know whether that still goes on. But in the sixties various splendid Victorian and art deco buildings and installations were being demolished or threatened by demolition.

And we always went to go and see what was happening and see what could be saved from the situation and I told you about the Criterion Restaurant, the demolition of the tower decoration there and saving sets of tiles from that for the V&A collection -and the Coal Exchange was threatened, it went...

**LS:** Where was that?

**BE:** Near Billingsgate, almost opposite Billingsgate. It was an extraordinary cast iron building circular with various floors and a sort of open well and a dome on top, by Bunning, a city architect. And it was remarkable in that all the decoration was reflective of what the building was about, um not only was the cast iron structure made in a relation of rushes and all the sorts of plant materials that would go into coal measures but also there were murals along the, each floor, around each floor, showing various views of prehistoric parts. It was a gem, oh it needed restoration, but it was a gem. But there wasn't any way of preserving it, Hugh and I, Hugh Wakefield and I went along to that and what we saved was some part of the cast iron structure showing this ah natural ornament on it which is somewhere in the crypt. So that failed in a way but we tried to do our best. And the Strand Palace Hotel, which had a wonderful foyer that was about to be demolished, done away with. I mean madness really! You know, these owners must regret it now. So part of that was actually saved and Selfridges lifts designed with metalwork designed by Edgar Brandt, he's a French 1920s and earlier designer. We saved a whole set of those, which gave, you know were worthwhile editions.

**LS:** Did you have to buy them or could you just turn up and say: we'll have those?

**BE:** I think on the whole we were given them, yup. We just had the problem of taking them apart and transporting them.

Although transcripts function most effectively in representing the content of interviews, listening to an audio recording is always only ever a matter of 'overhearing': no technology can reproduce the encounter, only its representation. Audio's illusory intimacy arises from its embodied origin in the speaker and the vibrations, which flow into the listener's ear towards his/her imagination. This is the power of storytelling. Stereophonic broadcasting's success has been to produce the conditions for close listening across time and space, to create sound souvenirs 'forcing us to rearticulate definitions of auditory cultural heritage' (Bijsterveld and van Dijck 2009) in a museum dedicated to objects. At the beginning of the research, the general perception in the Museum was that the interviews were specifically to supplement knowledge about the collection and although this information does surface, the recordings unfold the complexities of curatorial identity and its function. The embodied intimacy of the context

of audio recording as memory-work is used to explore how curators think about their life in the Museum: why they have undertaken certain projects, their attitudes to their collections and their institution and the emotional engagement of a life dedicated to objects.

Auto/biographical interviews elicit and sustain subjectivity in order to understand how subjects are constituted by their culture in and through their individual narratives. Nevertheless, rather than reifying individualism, the increasing interest in personal narratives even amongst historians has been prompted by the significance of culture and representation as historical fields of enquiry (Vinen 2011). As object historians, many museum curators experienced a similar shift in their work culture, from 'keeping to sharing', with less of a focus on provenance and attribution to acknowledging the significance of the social/historical and political context of objects. Curators are also more attuned to the cultural and social impact of their work, the need to publicise and disseminate their scholarship and activities, which feeds into their willingness to undertake oral history interviews. Knowing the archival destination of the recording, interviewees are aware of having the opportunity to tell their version, to present their perspective, to have their personal voice as part of the record in order to illuminate the future histories of the institution and its work.

The interviews document aspects of everyday museum work that are usually not told in official histories, possibly because they are seen as dull: accounts about working practices such as cataloguing, the introduction of computers, exhibition planning, acquisitions, attitudes to deaccessioning, the minutiae of museum bureaucracy. Unlike video interviews, which might encourage participants to self-consciously 'entertain', oral history takes seriously the desire to document the undocumented, what might seem obvious but is not usually talked about because it is taken for granted. What is the purpose of such accounts? What do they contribute to the record? Describing how he was trained in 1949, one curator explained:

I had to be instructed to make sure I knew the difference between an etching, an engraving, a mezzotint, a lithograph and so and so on through the various categories of graphic art which wasn't very time-consuming and easily learned. And then we just set to: we were given bundles to get on with it, which involved identifying the artist; describing the material; describing what it contained that is, like a German poster for Bavarin bock of circa 1900 which was a colour lithograph and so on, right down to Rembrandt etchings and material of that high quality. Much of our material of course was not of high quality; much of it was taken for social history purposes and for historic purposes, generally (Harold Barkley, V&A Prints and Drawings 1949-64, Circulation department 1964-76, Prints and Drawings, 1976-85).

Within this account of catalogue training, however, is a clear hierarchy of values held by a curator trained in

the immediate post-war period: the view that material ranged from etchings by an Old Master to posters '*not of high quality*' but which fulfilled '*social history purposes*', a matter of secondary importance in the museum culture of the time. The story is not just about the institution but also about curatorial values of the period; in telling their stories, curators 'create' their curatorial 'character' as well as that of the museum. Every narrative contains within it, therefore, the narrative identity of the museum as well as that of the curator, or the 'character' in the story being told. This dual function is the result of the research, which aims to understand two identities: museum and curator. Work identity research projects provide the opportunity to understand how such entangled identities function *in practice* as ongoing and contingent (Sandino 2010). Challenging the perception of museums as unchanging 'illusions of eternity' as Pierre Nora (1989) referred to them, these interviews reveal how constancy and change is intrinsic to both the museum and its curators because narrative is the form capable of holding together the seeming contradiction of sameness and transformation in which individuals create their identity:

The person shares the condition of dynamic identity peculiar to the story recounted. The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be termed his or her *narrative identity*, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character (Ricoeur 1992: 147).

Until 1983 when the National Heritage Act appointed a Board of Trustees to the V&A, it had been one of the museums (like the Science Museum) administered by the Department of Education and Science. Consequently, its staff were subject to Civil Service protocols and procedures which included signing the Official Secrets Act inculcating an ethos of reserve and restraint that combined with bureaucratic management to foster a specific curatorial culture (Sandino 2012, forthcoming). As recalled by one senior curator:

I remember one of the earliest was, I mean directly from the Ministry of Education, to pick out 100 of the most valuable objects to save in case of atomic attack, or some attack or in case of some emergency. Well don't forget this was not long afterwards, well about, about three years after the so-called Cuban missile crisis so I suppose it was felt that there was a danger of imminent atomic attack. I don't know how seriously that was felt in 1963-4 but one of the first jobs I had was to go round the Museum and pick out a 100 objects to save. It was almost like a sort of game because I couldn't discuss it with colleagues and admit what it was because it was highly confidential but in a surrealist sort of way it was quite good fun to do [...] it became clear to me for the first time, which I hadn't realised, how much of the administration of the Museum in those days was done in the Ministry of Education,

or it became the Department of Education and Science, and how relatively little was done within the Museum. That is – my memory is vague, but there was of course a Finance Officer in the V&A, and extremely good people they were, but they worked in terms of the civil service, at a fairly junior level and the main sort of financial management, I don't mean the detail but the overall financial management was done from the Ministry. I think that was a big change, I'm talking about the period before the Trusteeship and so on, which was 20 years later [2010] (Professor Michael Kauffmann, Prints and Drawings, 1960-1985).

The extract above, like the one preceding it, represent a generation for whom the line between 'official' and 'unofficial' would have been clearly drawn. They testify to an aspect of the Museum's history almost unknown to most of its visitors but a crucial element in the Museum's evolving identity and that of its collections.

### Summary

Museum oral histories are becoming a must-have activity and resource for many museums and galleries (Museums Association 2012). They are used to develop audiences, community participation, to increase and excite interest in the collections and in the past. While the V&A project can fulfil all these aims, it does not begin with them. As a form that elicits story/history-telling, oral history narrative research subscribes to interviews as occasions for mining and exploring the past (Kvale and Brinckmann 2009) not just for the interviewer, but for the interviewee as well. Matters come to light about what it means to be a curator within the narrative, as a particular form of agency that is able to encompass the complexity of everyday experience in which official account and unofficial comment, front of house stories and behind the scenes anecdotes are intermingled. Passages that describe duties and responsibilities are intermingled with reflections on how personal values are embedded in the curatorial project and the meaning of the institution. How this can be communicated to the listener, both present and in the future, and how experience can be interpreted becomes a shared venture for all protagonists and users of the all of whom are involved in coming to terms with the meaning problem, or shall we say the *quest* for meaning or significance that we give to our lives, to our being in the world. The question arises again and again in the life of each individual in particular, in fact, unique way and hence it requires a patient and ongoing examination of the multifarious forms and practices in which individuals make sense of their lives (Brockmeier 2009: 217).

As a means of giving voice, all oral histories produce narrative identities, individual voices projecting into the future, to whom respect is due as *persons* rather than only as manufacturers of history. Sensitive to the historical function and value of their contribution, as well as the academically sanctioned project, curators' life histories are at once official and unofficial revealing the entangled quest of identity of self and other.

### Notes

- 1 CCW [Camberwell, Chelsea, Wimbledon] Graduate School at the University of the Arts London. The author is the Senior Research Fellow in charge of the project, which includes two part-time researchers: Dr Matthew Partington and Anthony Burton, former Director of the V&A Museum of Childhood.
- 2 Interviews were conducted by Anthony Burton. The duration of all the recordings conducted so far across the project range between two and fourteen hours.
- 3 The audio files are property of the V&A. Extracts will be available in due course on the V&A website oral history hub which is currently under construction.

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Interviews: © Victoria & Albert Museum

Betty Elzea interviewed by Linda Sandino, 2009.

Harold Barkley interviewed by Anthony Burton, August, 2009.

Michael Kauffmann interviewed by Anthony Burton, December, 2009.