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Speaking about Things: Oral History as Context¹

Linda Sandino,
Camberwell College of Arts
University of the Arts

Abstract

'Speaking About Things: Oral History as Context' draws on life history interviews conducted under the auspices of two oral history projects: the Life Story Collection at The British Library National Sound Archive [2003-4] [LSC], and the Voices in the Visual Arts [VIVA] project based at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London [2005-]. Oral histories, while focusing on the singularity of individual testimony, are here understood as creating 'a vital document to the construction of consciousness, emphasising both the variety of experience in any social group, and also how each individual draws on a common culture: a defiance of the rigid categorisation of private and public just as of memory and reality' (Samuel & Thompson, 1990: 2). The paper, therefore, addresses the value of life stories (sections within the overall life history) to demonstrate the ways in which interviews with designers offer a 'thick description' of the networks in which designers are situated as subjects. How designers talk, rather than write, about their work, and designed objects, in oral history interviews reveals their visual and embodied memories in everyday practice in which designed objects are not autonomous productions but are recollected as arising in a web of recollected images and references which all contribute to the meaning of 'design' and the identity of a designer.

¹ Following delivery at the tVAD conference, Show/Tell: Relationships between Text, Narrative and Image, a shortened version of this paper appeared as the Introduction to *The Journal of Design History* Special Issue 'Oral Histories and Design', vol. 19/4, 2006.



Introduction

In his life history recording, Colin Forbes, one of the founding members of the design group Pentagram, mentions Bob Gill's mantra that a good design concept was one that you could explain to someone over the phone (LSC/Forbes, C464/39/03). A decade earlier, Randall Rothenberg used this phrase in his essay for *Pentagram Book Five* (1992), one of the group's occasional publications, which sit between catalogue, manifesto and promotion (Gorb, 1978; Yalevich, 2004). For Rothenberg the phrase encapsulates the heroic commitment to 'idea-based design' at Pentagram:

As Alfred Sloan's world slowly evolved into Michael Eisner's, a new design ethic was required. Pentagram represented it. This ethic – it was strong enough to be called an ideology – was idea-based design. It asserted that design communicated both viscerally and intellectually – that it gratified the soul at the same time that it satisfied the mind.... Idea-based design posited that each communication opportunity – or “problem” as the firm referred to it - was unique and therefore invited a singular solution, one that could be intellectualised and elucidated. In a formulation usually attributed to one or another of Pentagram's original partners, “an idea isn't an idea unless it can be explained down the phone” (1992: 10).

Whether or not Pentagram was the originator of this 'ideology' is obviously debatable, and not the key issue, since in assigning the phrase to Gill, Forbes is doing more than putting the record straight. What both texts highlight is the significance these designers placed on the importance of words as well as the images. Oral histories, therefore, rather than obscuring or devaluing the image, offer a medium through which design work can be apprehended and communicated. Nevertheless, the resurfacing of the anecdote in *Book Five*, raises interesting questions, for an oral history interviewer, about what recordings for the National Sound Archive Life Story Collection with original members of the group adds to their well-documented representation and place in history (LSC/Fletcher, 2003; LSC/Grange, 2003; LSC/Kurlansky, 2003; LSC/McConnell, 2003/4).

In the oral history recording, Forbes' anecdote was set in the context of his description of working with Gill, an American, who brought with him American 'savvy' and energy which impressed his English partners. Gill's remark, therefore, was less the elaboration



of an ideology than an attempt to show his colleagues (Forbes and Alan Fletcher) the advantages of American-style pithy pitching. Its function therefore provided a contrast and context to British ways of securing design work in the 1960s, rather than in securing and celebrating a particular Pentagram design 'ethic' where the originator of the phrase is less important. However, knowing that the phrase was Gill's reframes its' meaning. As historian Alessandro Portelli (2006) has succinctly noted, oral history is primarily concerned with *meaning*. Oral histories enable a 'thick description' of the contexts of practice, its networks and intersections. As such oral history can illuminate how discourses are constructed in recollected accounts of everyday life and how they circulated within a particular community, offering an opportunity to grasp the interconnections between the individual and his/her culture. Using extracts from recordings with graphic designers Alex Maranzano of Minale Tattersfield (VIVA/Maranzano, 2005), and John McConnell of Pentagram (LSC/McConnell, 2003/4), their recordings demonstrate the complex formations of memory texts and their distinctive characteristics as texts about visual culture.

The Individual and the Collective

Interviews have become a standard method for eliciting information about objects as diverse as fridge magnets, cross-stitching, *Second-hand Cultures* and laptops (Atkinson, 2005; Clark, 2002; Gregson & Crewe, 2003; Turney, 2004). Dress historian Lou Taylor is one of the few design historians to have devoted some attention to the uses of oral history, praising its ability to access material that is unavailable through other means which can throw light on the cultural meanings of dress and/or objects (2002). She cites Raphael Samuel's conviction that oral history presents through 'the individuality of each life story ... a vital document to the construction of consciousness, emphasising both the variety of experience in any social group, and also how each individual story draws on a common culture: a defiance of the rigid categorisation of private and public just as of memory and reality' (Samuel & Thompson in Taylor, 2002:247).

Taylor inevitably focuses on the value of oral history as a supplement to dress history and warns against the dangers in relying only on the recorded evidence, pointing out the unreliability of memories and the vagaries of individual bias. Nevertheless, summing up



the method's benefits, she commends 'its ability to clarify the individuality of each human life and yet to reveal the contribution of each person within the wider community' (2002: 260). This placing of individual memory within the collective allows individual life histories to escape the opprobrium of [auto] biography while sustaining the social character of the historian's quest.

Individual narratives have had an ambivalent place in academic History. In a review of Nigel Warburton's biography *Ernö Goldfinger: The Life of an Architect* (2003), the architectural historian Elizabeth Darling questioned the continuing role of the biographical monograph as a viable scholarly output. Darling quotes the historian Michael Freedman's warning against 'the individualist fallacy' 'which "overstresses the function of a particular individual as the creator of a system"' (Darling, 2004: 420). Life History recordings would seem to be entirely complicit in producing such a fallacious account. Obversely, in reviewing the Show5 Crafts Council publications, which all focus on a particular craft practitioner, Andrea Peach seemed to welcome the biographical approach, concluding that the series will 'hopefully set a precedent which can now allow younger generations of craft practitioners to be recognised and celebrated' (Peach, 2005: 211). While these opposing responses to biography partly arise from issues of cultural hierarchies, it also raises the broader historiographic concern about 'Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory' (Crane, 1997).

Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs seminal *Historical Memory and Collective Memory* (1925), the American historian Susan Crane outlines his distinction between the two terms: 'Collective memory ... is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive'. In contrast, historical memory 'begins when social traditions are broken and living contact with the past has been lost; all that remains are fragments as artefacts' (Crane, 1997:1377). The historian's role is to reconstruct and represent the fabric of the past from its archived remains whereas collective memory works to coalesce individual memories within and for their social contexts. As an example of collective memory, one might cite accounts of the 1960s which circulate through various media including television programmes, retro fashion



and interiors, art exhibitions and films (BBC *All Mod Cons*, 1997; *20th Century Roadshow*, 2005; Imperial War Museum *From the Bomb to the Beatles* (1999/2000); Tate Modern *This Was Tomorrow: Art of the Sixties*, 2004; Tate Liverpool *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, 2005), all contributing to sustaining a shared social, 'collective' memory; although how that time is remembered may not substantiate the myths which identify it in the present. Nevertheless, Crane provides a way of thinking through how individual oral testimonies can be located within historical discourse while yet maintaining the singularity of the individual's subjective identity: 'A revised notion of collective memory may provide a theoretical basis for imagining a different kind of historical memory, which would focus on the way individuals experience themselves as historical entities' (Crane, 1997:1375). Oral history asks respondents to do just this, and through their accounts, as will be demonstrated below, they are able to locate their experiences as historical.

Experience

In his *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (2004), the American historian Dominick LaCapra has noted the advent of the 'experiential turn' in cultural studies.

In this last decade or so, historians have turned or returned to the question of experience, particularly with respect to non-dominant groups and such problems as memory in its relation to history.

...the experiential turn has also directed attention to the problem of the status and nature of testimony that does not simply convey information about events but bears witness to experience... (2004:61).

LaCapra's deconstruction of memory, experience and identity is useful in thinking through the life story narratives as texts beyond the immediately subjective or biographical. Identity, for LaCapra 'is probably best understood as a problematic constellation or more or less changing configuration of subject positions. And subject positions themselves are not necessarily fixed or complacent' (2004:5). He goes on to emphasise the crucial role of subject positions in understanding experience and identity since '*Identity formation might even be defined in nonessentialised terms as a problematic attempt to configure and, in certain ways, coordinate subject positions*' (2004:59-60, original italics). LaCapra also raises the issue of to what extent the historian's subject position[s] should be made explicit 'to the extent that they are pertinent to research and argument', a particularly



significant question for oral historians. He lists the standard subject positions relevant to identity formation: 'sexuality, gender, family, language, nationality, ethnicity, class, "race", religion or secular ideology, occupation, and at times, disciplinary affiliation' (2004:60). As he points out, identity politics are at the core of social interaction as well as the individual's sense of self. Interviews with arts practitioners reveal a compelling sense of identity, which is dispersed and fragmented across the panorama of the life history.

In his recording for the Camberwell College of Arts *Voices in the Visual Arts* (VIVA) project, the graphic designer Alex Maranzano of Minale Tattersfield, began the account of his background by declaring himself to be one of the first Europeans, born, as he was, of Italian parents in a French prisoner of war camp, delivered by English nuns/nurses. Maranzano positions himself and his family as up-rooted but nevertheless situated within a tight knit Italian identity since his father was a master chef in Italian embassies in Paris and London. Class, national identity, family, religion, gender and occupation interweave and bind together a narrative in which Maranzano reflects on his childhood experiences and the historical transformations of his own subject positions. This is compellingly illustrated in the recording when Maranzano reflects on Minale Tattersfield's work for the (New) Labour Party's *Modernising Government* (1991) campaign. After describing the evolution of the design concept, Maranzano turned to the story of visiting 11 Downing Street for the final presentation to Jack Cunningham, Minister to the Cabinet Office. The story turns on one principal axis: the success of the design but within that it evidences Maranzano's acknowledgement of teamwork, his embodied sense of remembering linked to his visual recollection of the scene, set apart from the efficacy of the design solution that is the initial point of the story.

One of my designers, Paul Astbury, bless him, he made a little badge. He had this little blue badge with the white 'g' with a yellow sun, and I had it there. You see. I put there. And then I walked in with him. That's right. I walked in with him. And we did our bit. And I... Just to finish off. I took these badges out and I put one on my own and then I put one on Dr Cunningham. I said, "Excuse me", and I put one there. I put three or four. They were all around in these leather seats. Palatial room. And then they were all looking at each other. I said, "Look you can't miss it". And I said, "Less is more". One of our favourite expressions. I said, "it's that big and you can all identify with it." Straight away, all eyes lit up. (VIVA/Maranzano, 14/2005).



Maranzano's memory of walking, taking the badges, pinning them on, are all gestures that reinforce the visual memory of the event and describe the embodied self in interaction (Cándida Smith, 2006). It shows how a designer conducts himself in such a meeting, and how the design work is made to function within this particular context.

However, the end of that particular memory returns to one of the main themes of Maranzano's life story in which shifting subject positions are understood in relation to those experienced as self and other:

And I felt on a high, you know. And, all of a sudden, here's me, this Italian, I didn't really tell them I wasn't English. They may have guessed it. Amongst all these sort of government people, you know. And that's an achievement. And, my dad would have laughed. You know he passed away, as I said, many years back, but it was sort of ... Dad had always been used to serving all these big almighty people and never really quite mixed with them because, you know, although you're a chef they're on a different level. So I've had some memorable moments. Very exciting. (VIVA/Maranzano, 14/2005).

Questioning him about his identification and sense of distance from his father's position, as well as wondering about his allegiance to any political party, I asked him if he felt that he was 'serving' the Labour Party? Maranzano was adamant in his reply, summarising his principles as a designer, emphasising his commitment to quality by the repeated use of the superlative 'best' and the moral injunction about what's 'right'.

No. I was serving design. I was doing the right solution for the party and I was doing what was good for them, what was right for them, and I wanted it to be the very best for them. And I hopefully I communicated the very best values. I've always done that, Linda. Whatever the project was for, it isn't just about me pleasing myself. It's what's right for them, what's best for them. (VIVA/Maranzano, 14/2005).

LaCapra questions the privileged role of language as the signifying practice used to discuss other signifying practices such as music, or in the case under discussion here, the visual arts and design. Consenting to the idea that language is mediation, he goes on to question the 'complex experience of using language' citing various examples such as 'a lower class child speaking in an upper-class environment, of the lone woman speaking in a meeting of [male] executives' (2004:62). With such examples, LaCapra underlines the experiential contexts in which speaking must be understood. Thus Alex Maranzano's story of attending the meeting at Number 11 engages us in sharing a sense of the



complexities of identity politics through his recollected account in which visual and gestural memories are linked to produce his experiential narrative of design in practice.

Memory and Identity

Memory, as the historian Alon Confino has stated, 'is everywhere'; and while it has been used in a variety of contexts from the academic to the populist, all share a 'topical common denominator: the ways in which people construct a sense of their past' (Confino, 1997). Confino's concern in his essay is to think through how memory 'can be useful in articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience' (1997:1386). Although he does not allude to oral history specifically, the memories evoked in the interview demonstrate the connections as well as the gaps between representation and experience.

Without memories oral history would be an impossible, not to say inconceivable, method and this accounts for their privileging as a concept, as the process of remembering and as a faculty applicable to people as well as things. The OED includes the definition 'exemption from oblivion' (OED 1972). This phrase encapsulates the historian's project in bringing into the present material from the past since although memories are located in the individual's mind, particular circumstances are necessary in order for it, or them, to be revived. Remembering is active rather than passive. By asking respondents to recollect instances and their feelings at the time, oral history could be seen to be abandoning objective empiricism for the subjective approach of psychoanalysis. Though as the historian Ludmilla Jordanova has noted psychoanalysis 'broadly defined takes the complexities of the mind seriously and ... helps historians to develop more satisfying ways of understanding human actions and experiences' (Jordanova, 2000:57). However, while oral history delves into the past, it does not seek to unravel pathologies, although it does share an interest in origins and beginnings. Life history recordings often begin with the question: What is your family background?

I suppose, curiously enough we wouldn't be known as a close family so there would a lot of holes I suspect ... Dynasty was never really an important part of the McConnell family. So, I can remember grandparents on both sides. My father's father and mother lived in Ashford in Kent and he, I recall, was a printer's reader, that's a proof reader, a corrector of printed works [] And was deaf, which they attributed to the noise of the machines (LSC/McConnell, C464/38/01)



John McConnell's response demonstrates how an individual can represent his [her] sense of origin and identity, in his case by beginning the description of his family background with his paternal grandfather whose own life in printing would be markedly different from that of his grandson. Despite possible 'holes', and a disavowal of 'dynasty', the family is still the archetypal 'memory-community' (Kuhn, 2000:193), and McConnell's memory evokes the sensory and imagistic quality of his grandparents' Kent home: *'It always smelled of fruit. I remember apples in the bedroom floors. They were always keeping apples on the bedroom floor I remember, on newspaper'* (LSC/McConnell, C464/38/01). As Annette Kuhn has noted, memory texts typically involve snapshots and flashes since the language of memory seems to be 'above all a language of images' (Kuhn, 1995, pp. 5-6). McConnell's evocation of the aroma of apples is visually punctuated by the added final reference to newsprint fixing the visual memory of the scene (Yates, 1969).

However, there seems to be a qualitative difference in how designers evoked their pasts and how they described their professional practices and procedures. As historians we are constantly aware of the need to 'check the facts' by comparing documents, consulting archives, reading other primary texts, though even those, as Jordanova warns 'do not offer access to what was, only what was said about it' (2000:85). McConnell's paper delivered to the Royal Society of Arts, 'Cover to Cover' presents a carefully thought out exposition of his approach to the design of book covers humorously characterising certain types of writers ('The Tombstone', 'The Italian Bride' and 'Smart Art'), and stylistic strategies. This written account of his design strategy for Faber poetry emphasises authorial intention:

I decided to adopt a very English traditional attitude towards the style of the cover, the typography, the Scotch rules around the panel and the use of double 'P' and a repeat pattern.... I borrowed the idea for the plays series from circus playbills. I made a repetitive pattern with use of simple two-colour overprint to make a third colour and enjoyed the energy that the technique created. It was appropriate at that time, when Faber were particularly interested in younger playwrights. It is quite clearly more progressive in style than the poetry series (McConnell 1993:153).

The written text focuses on processes, the genesis of the concept and its impact as 'progressive'. In many ways the text can be likened to a manifesto since it is a complete



and coherently structured account of McConnell's approach to book design at Faber and Faber.

The new designs also represented the restructuring of the company's design policy that for McConnell signified a complex set of design affinities and strategies as recounted in the life history interview. On being asked about his experience at Faber, and how the work had come about, after establishing that the initial contact had been through John Bodley, an editor at Faber at the time (1981), McConnell went on to describe Faber's reputation as a publisher with a roll call of key designers:

Faber and Faber, of course, had a tradition, a very long tradition of designing and commissioning excellent designers from Nash to McKnight Kauffer, Freedman, Eric Fraser, Rockwell Kent, but their ... the process had begun ... had gone into disrepair, and they wanted to reinstate their reputation. (LSC/McConnell, C464/38/06)

McConnell's list is revealing in that it lists designers rather than fine artists working for Faber who included for instance Ben Nicholson, Moholy-Nagy, or Graham Sutherland; McConnell's list, affirms his affinities with modernist design and its history. These references to particular individuals act as particularizations, which situate the individual's design ethic and practice (Oak, 2006).

After establishing the context of his entry into Faber, the questions turned to the two previous attempts to reinvigorate the publisher's designs and the reasons for their failure. McConnell's account of these failures becomes a morality tale about two mythic archetypes to be found in design: the genius and the despot.

One person who tried before me went away, and ... sort of produced a rule book because they thought that was the solution to managing it and within minutes that was dismantled. And of course rulebooks could never, never cope with the complexity of a publishing house and the individuals who play games in the publishing house. A rulebook never deals with politics; it just becomes a politic in itself. So, that ran aground pretty quickly. And the second attempt was someone who decided that through sheer bravado and demonstration of his skills that they would all melt and come into line. So the story goes, I don't how true it was, but the story goes that he locked himself into a room for six months and appeared with the ultimate book. And of course it also ran aground. So because, therefore, because of my interest in the structures of organisations and how you manage the creative process through the political minefield that usually exists in those organisations which, I might add are worse in anything which has academic connections ... they seem to breed a complexity of debate which actually just adds a whole mystery. But, anyway... and of course publishing is very close to academia and the people



in it feel very secure in that environment. So I had to, I made very sure that if I did take the job on, that I wasn't gonna go ... that I wasn't gonna fail. (LSC/McConnell, C464/38/06)

The above extract could be seen simply as providing background to McConnell's strategies. However, the story is meaningful in that it conveys the sense in which McConnell's remembering of the event is structured around the Scylla and Charybdis to be avoided if he is to succeed: it becomes a reflective morality tale positioning the 'heroic' narrator at the beginning of a strategic campaign. Apart from the structure of the tale, McConnell's shift to 'gonna' (McConnell is not American) is also striking in that it demonstrates his distance from what is perceived as the punctilious academic. It also reiterates McConnell's position as an outsider preparing to take on a fairly hidebound and entrenched design department highlighting the increasingly complex, strategic relationships between designers and their clients.

The Faber story, like the Number 11 story, throws light on the production of images within the context of the lived, recollected experiences of their designers in which creative production is situated within 'circuits of subjectivity' (Smith, 2003) that draw together the various contexts and objects of memory work.

Conclusion

This paper has begun to examine the contribution of life stories to understanding design practice as part of a collective memory of design's history, in which individual stories construct and reconstruct the meaning of what designers do through what they say. With its focus on an individual life, it might be criticised as sustaining the 'individual fallacy' of historical agency. It is the history of objects and practices that are seen to provide access to social systems and communities of the past in which the historian's 'craft is to conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater' (Steedman, 2001:18). As the extracts quoted have demonstrated, however, life story narratives enable interviewees to engage in a specifically historical reflexivity. In the course of the interviews, individuals are able, as Susan Crane suggested above, to 'experience themselves as historical entities', bound into and situated within an understanding of broader social and professional changes.



Curiously, designed images rarely prompted memories during the interviews. Rather they became opportunities for explanations about the design-idea, reinforcing the illusion that the designs are 'ideal solutions' and their genesis as authored intentions. Memory's snapshots and the stories they engender enable interviewees to encounter their own transformation which, as Annette Kuhn has suggested in relation to the photograph, 'help the practitioner [of the memory text] move beyond the purely personal response and towards a consideration of the photograph's cultural embeddedness, its broader meanings and the response it generates' (Kuhn, 1995:6). This also accounts for the sense of engagement which recordings generate for the listener and interviewer since: 'Even the most "personal" and concrete contents and forms of remembering may have a purchase in the intersubjective domain of shared meanings, shared feeling, shared memories' (Kuhn, 2000:191).

Life stories offer historians a means of engaging with and understanding the past thereby producing an account that is not only rich in texture and meaning but importantly 'transforms objects of study into subjects' (Thompson 1988:99). Oral history is an embodied account and encounter with the past, providing an opportunity to create a reflexive dialogue about the past as a historical dimension in which the objects and images are also situated historically through the perspective of the present. In terms of disciplinary fields, Jordanova makes the important observation that the shift to 'visual' and 'material' culture studies denotes a 'more *historical* category' (2000: 89, my italics); individuals and objects are refracted through their network of relationships, and the discourses which frame them. Kuhn makes a powerful argument for memory work as an act of historical consciousness-raising and the 'memory text' as a cultural production.

...but if memories are one individual's, their associations extend far beyond the personal. They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, and the historical. Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and 'personal memory'. In these case histories outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychical, coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible (Kuhn, 1995:4).

In their description of their approach to design as problem solving, McConnell and Maranzano demonstrate how they share a conception of graphic design as visual



communication, a conception their narratives plot through their education and mentors, showing how ideologies are inculcated and become practice. Although their accounts can be mined for facts and information about the genesis of design campaigns, the use of images and other factual information, the narratives are not transparent or unmediated representations. Nevertheless, life stories do contribute to the 'thick description' of the context of images and their production. As graphic design historian Richard Buchanan has suggested, there is a need for 'new repositionings' in design history, proposing that 'more attention should be given to the various conceptions of design held by designers in the past. This would reposition design history from material objects or 'things' to thought and action. In other words what designers say and do, the history of their art as philosophy and practice' (Buchanan, 1995:12).

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Contact

Linda Sandino,
Senior Research Fellow,
Camberwell College of Arts
University of the Arts
Wilson Road
London SE5 8LU
l.sandino@camberwell.arts.ac.uk