

THE ARTIST SPEAKS: THE INTERVIEW AS DOCUMENTATION

by Stephen Bury and Helen Scott

Nearly every exhibition catalogue now contains an interview with, or related statement by, the artist. How and why did this become the norm? The increasing popularity of the artist's words is traced back in this article to its roots in Romanticism, the rise of the mass media and the cult of the avant-garde artist. The value and reliability of the transcribed and printed words is questioned and a bibliography of published interviews with artists follows.

Jasper John's sculpt-metal *The Critic sees* (1961), with its pair of spectacles over two opening mouths in place of eyes, was made in response to a critic who 'paid no attention to what I said'¹. Today, the artist's words – in interview or statement – are accorded somewhat greater attention: nearly every contemporary art exhibition catalogue has an interview with the artist, and every Masters course in Fine Art seems to require a written statement of intent. Librarians and archivists are turning their attention to these primary sources: recent articles in this journal have included a description of the *Artists' Lives* tape project by Cathy Courtney and the *Artists' Papers Register* by David Tomkins². This article will hopefully provide some context to the rise in importance of the published interview in particular and explore some of the problems in handling it³.

Although the dialogue genre dates back at least to Plato, it is the spread of printing which made it popular: Martin Luther's voluminous *Table talk* helped create perhaps the first 'media' personality. The Romantic interest in inspiration, creativity and its penchant for the unfinished, the incomplete and improvisation gave further impetus to the 'conversation': we have Heinrich von Kleist's *Maler-Sohn* and *Dichter-Maler* letters (1809), and William Hazlitt's *Conversations of James Northcote* (1830) in which that discursive painter – of whom Hazlitt said that his thoughts 'bubble up and sparkle, like beads on old wine' – gives his opinion on Reynolds, Titian, and Pitt the Younger amongst others⁴. The genre is still a literary one with the dictates of prose style still hegemonic, and the status of the evidence uncertain, being written down after the fact.

The genre now needed to be coupled with technology – advances in taking down the words of the interviewee. There had been various 'shorthand' systems in operation since the 15th century but these were very largely personal. In 1786 Samuel Taylor systematized a form of 'shorthand' which became

widespread, but it was only with Isaac Pitman's 'Stenographic sound-hand' (1837) that a 'universal' form was achieved. Reporters from newspapers, equipped with shorthand, could interview personalities – this was part of the 'new journalism' that characterised the last twenty years of the 19th century. It was these years that saw too the rise of the avant-garde artist, and as they themselves sought to explore new media – radio, film, chromium-dioxide audio-tape, video-tape – these very media would also transform them into media personalities: Charbonnier's *entretiens* were commissioned for France III (RTF), David Sylvester's interviews of modern American painters for BBC Radio. Exploitation of the sound cassette gave us William Furlong and Barry Barker's *Audio arts* (1973-); of the videotape, *Art/New York* (1980-). Andy Warhol, described by Jeanne Siegel as 'the least articulate of artists', explored the cult of the personality in his magazine, *Interview* (1972-) and his own TV show in the early 1980s⁵.

The literary origins of the 'conversation' persisted. Edouard Roditi's *Dialogues on art* (London, 1960) was 'based on notes hurriedly scribbled in the course of actual conversations':

As I redrafted these notes later for publication, I cheated no more than the average journalist who writes up his impressions of an interview. But a journalist generally cheats by high-lighting the 'informality' of such an interview, whereas I have cheated by perhaps over-stressing the formal progression of our discussions. These are indeed dialogues rather than interviews, perhaps because I hoped to produce a work that might be less ephemeral than journalistic impressions of twelve meetings with painters and sculptors⁶.

Similarly, Selden Rodman in his *Conversations with artists* (1957) confessed that he had not availed himself of new technology:

No tape recorder was used and I do not take shorthand. My memory is fairly good, but in almost every instance I took more than notes – a word-for-word transcription of actual phrases and sentences, often whole paragraphs – with the conviction that the actual phraseology employed is as much a clue to the person interviewed as what he or she actually says⁷.

It is surprising, despite the available technologies, how many interviews still depend on the jotted note. This obviously determines the weight we can put on a particular interview as evidence.

The extent of editorial control can be crucial. Barbara Catoir re-arranged her interviews with Tàpies 'thematically': this involves some disregarding of chronological sequence: it is as if it did not matter when Tàpies said a particular thing – 'the skull of the young Voltaire' fallacy, the assumption that an artist would not change their viewpoint over time⁸. Arnold Haskell's conversations with Jacob Epstein were spread over a 'considerable period' and he acknowledged that he made them more coherent:

He most certainly never holds forth for the length of some of the passages that follow. I have purposely made a continuous narrative from the chips of talk, and have to that extent misrepresented him . . .⁹.

Where the editor has a particular axe to grind, this control is potentially dangerous: one is suspicious of Barbara Lee Diamonstein's equation of the art world with New York, or of Paul Cummings' premise that all art stems from drawing¹⁰.

Purging the text of grammatical infelicities, verbal tics, repetitions, longeurs and hesitations now seems to be an inevitable product of the transcription of sound to text. Part of the success of David Sylvester's interviews with Francis Bacon is his preservation of the 'particular rhythms and gestures of his speech'¹¹. It is instructive to compare the published with the first transcript or even the recording. In the Chelsea College of Art & Design Archive there is the first transcript of the Susan Hiller recording for the book, *A fruitful incoherence* (1998). Here is the passage about the *Dream screens* Internet project, quoting from the book first:

There actually aren't any whale sounds. It's interesting you should hear that. There's the human heart beat, there's Morse code of someone who's actually having a lucid dream and he's tapping out: 'I am dreaming, I am dreaming, I am dreaming', and there are pulsar frequencies. You are absolutely right: these are pulses that run through the whole piece as in Raudive's idea of amplifying silence which was my starting point for the soundtrack of *Élan*. It's based on Raudive's experiments when he left tape recorders

running in empty, silent rooms and he then amplified the silence, discovering audible ghostly voices. I don't want either to debunk or to approve of his findings, I just consider this a very compelling metaphor for the kind of things that interest me, wanting to find the space between – I want to find the sound in the silence, the meaningful in nonsense.

There actually aren't whale sounds. It's interesting you should say that. Well, there's the human heart beat, there's Morse code of someone who's actually having a lucid dream and he's tapping out: I am dreaming, I am dreaming, I am dreaming. You are absolutely right: there are pulses that run through the whole thing but you know that this idea of amplifying silence to find out what's in it, is the basis of the soundtrack of this piece, which is Raudive's experiment when he left tape-recorders running in empty, silent rooms and he then amplified the silence, and in that silence he discovered audible voices, ghostly . . . I don't want to debunk or approve of his findings: I just find this a very compelling metaphor for the sort of things that interest me. And going back to ideas that we've mentioned – illumination and so forth and so on – I want to find the space between, I want to find the sound and the silence, you know, the meaningful and the nonsense, and so forth and so on¹².

There is no material alteration here, but we have the assimilation of an informal, unprompted interview into what is perceived to be a 'written' style, an accurate transcript into a readable text. Nonetheless it is a caution that published interviews should be checked against the tapes before their primary status can be assured.

But there is another assumption that the art historian should guard against – what R. G. Collingwood, summarising the Italian historiographer, Giambattista Vico, described as 'the prejudice of thinking the ancients better informed than ourselves about the times that lay nearer to them', or what could be termed the fallacy of proximity to source¹³. Because an artist was there at a particular event, it does not mean that it happened that way, at least without the triangulation of other proofs. Selective memory is not confined to politicians.

Finally, whilst we must not let the word efface the art, it is possible that artworks can hold conversations of their own. Rosalind Krauss in her ingenious *The Picasso papers*¹⁴ suggests that Picasso's collage, *Bottle on a table*, of 1912, not only preserves the conversations and *faits divers* of the bar and newspaper, but constitutes a Bakhtinian dialogic process, between Picasso, Braque and Gris. If only we could interview Picasso again.

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2. Courtney, Cathy. 'Artists' lives'. *Art Libraries Journal* vol. 23 no. 4 1998, p.5-8; Tomkins, David. 'Creating the Artists' Papers Register'. *Art Libraries Journal* vol. 24 no. 2 1999, p.16-21.
3. The word 'interview' is used to embrace several forms – conversation (with both speakers nominally equal), dialogue (with one of the speakers prompting the other, more 'dominant' speaker) and 'interview', which is a sort of populist dialogue (usually with a famous or infamous person) and intended for publication – the word, of French origin, was re-introduced into French by 1883. This article will concentrate on the published variety.
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5. *Art talk: the early 80s*, edited by Jeanne Siegel. New York: Da Capo, 1988, p.3.
6. Roditi, Edouard. *Dialogues on art*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1960, p.15.
7. Rodman, Selden. *Conversations with artists*. New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1957, p.xx-xxi.
8. Catoir, Barbara. *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies, with an introduction to the artist's work*. Munich: Prestel, 1991, p.[7].
9. *The sculptor speaks: Jacob Epstein to Arnold L. Haskell: a series of conversations*. London: William Heinemann, 1931, p.xi.
10. *Inside the art world: conversations with Barbaralee Diamonstein*. New York: Rizzoli, 1994, p.7; *Artists in their own words: interviews by Paul Cummings*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979, p.xi-xii.
11. Sylvester, David. *Interviews with Francis Bacon 1962-1979*. New ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980, p.6.
12. *A fruitful incoherence: dialogues with artists on internationalism*, edited by Gavin Jantjes in association with Rohini Malik, Steve Bury, and Gilane Tawadros. London: inIVA, 1998, p.27 cf. Chelsea College of Art & Design Archive, transcript and tape.
13. Collingwood, R. G. *The idea of history*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.69 cf. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1984, p.60-106.
14. Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Picasso papers*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998, p.39-40, 247, developing

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