

Oral History in Art: A New Tool

by Winberta Yao

This is the age of the interview. Since the 1960's, this mode of communication has quite pervasively permeated the field of art and photography. Rather than penning written statements and personal missives, artists have been resorting to the spoken word, presenting their ideas and providing information about themselves in response to outside questioning. As Lawrence Alloway has noted, the first statements of Pop artists, an "informal group, without manifestoes or a common program" were "in the form of interviews, elicited externally." It was the first time that the verbal definition of a new tendency . . . was performed entirely by interview.¹ Such interviews devoted to the contemporary art scene have continued to appear in the pages of art journals, often entitled "Conversations with . . ." or "Dialogue with . ..". *Phoebus* is no exception. In its second issue (1979), the reader will find "A Conversation between Adolph Gottlieb and Jack Breckenridge."² There have even been entire periodical publications concentrating on interviews—notably a production conceived by Andy Warhol in 1969 entitled *Interview*, and *Visual Dialog*, published in California from 1975 to mid-1979.

This is not to say that the interview as a medium of communication with artists was never used before. As Alloway has pointed out, Matisse, throughout his

long career, was a participant in a number of interviews.³ But widespread publication in the direct question-and-answer format did not exist in art journals until the last twenty years, nor were they presented often in entire book-length publications. There are now two recent examples of the latter, one covering artists and the other photographers. Since they are not the first and will not be the last of this genre,⁴ it may be well to comment on them and examine the nature of their contribution to the organized body of information available on artists and photographers.

Neither volume consists of interviews done specifically for the purpose of publication in book form. In Paul Cummings's *Artists in Their Own Words*, interviews with eleven artists and one photographer (Walker Evans) completed between 1968 and 1973 for the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution have been condensed for inclusion in this book.⁵ Because of the shortened format, breaks in the continuity of a conversation are sometimes evident. Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper's *Dialogue with Photography* includes almost twice as many interviews as Cummings's interviews, conducted between 1974 and 1978 and originally published in the Swiss periodical, *Camera*. The photographers selected were from the ranks of the most revered pioneers of

the field in the twentieth century. Unlike *Artists in Their Own Words*, which has been edited so that all interviews are more or less the same length, the difference in individual responses in *Dialogue with Photography* is readily apparent. Words and thoughts spill forth animatedly from such men as Robert Doisneau, Helmut Gernsheim, Beaumont Newhall, and Minor White, while there is more reserve and less ebullience on the part of others. The material in these two volumes is at once current and retrospective in nature. Five artists and five photographers from these two groups have died since their participation, imparting a certain poignancy and meaningfulness to their words as we read them now.⁶ Additionally, since seven of them at the time they were interviewed were between seventy-one and ninety-two, their thoughts in many instances have historical connotations.

The presentation of these interviews is simple, with a minimum of supporting material. In Cummings's book there is a brief, informal biographical section preceding the interview that serves as a recapitulation of the artist's life and art, and one or two black-and-white illustrations of his work. A similar biographical introduction would have been desirable in the work on photographers, which has, on the other hand, a selected bibliography of the interviewee's published photographic work.

As attested to by the large number of interviews on record in recent years, and despite occasional protests to the contrary, artists and photographers seem quite able and willing to verbalize, at least within the setting of an interview.⁷ The interviewing of artists is essentially an autobiographical quest, not only for personal information, anecdotal details, and eyewitness accounts but for memo-

ries, perceptions, nuances, and feelings. Guided by a deft interviewer, free association and free expression are encouraged. Observations and opinions that are not common knowledge or of public record are sought. Traits of personality, characteristic manners of speech emerge. There is a probing for motivations and there are revelations of influences and relationships, articulation of artistic philosophies, analytical discussions of stylistic and technical concepts and practices. The social and cultural milieu is depicted. Perhaps more than in any other field of human activity, the information coming from artists is of a highly subjective, introspective nature; they themselves are indisputably the best sources on their own art. This "single source," wherein the work of art and its verbal/textual interpretation issue from one individual, turns the words of artists into highly valued "inside information."⁸ As less and less material of a holographic nature, in the form of personal records, letters, and diaries, is being produced in modern society, the interview is regarded as a new, fertile source.

The term "oral history" is commonly used to categorize this unique information source—although it is descriptively inaccurate because it is not yet established history but, in this form, raw material of history. Its method is to create an ambience, through direct, neutral, open-ended, "unloaded" questions and comments,⁹ whereby individuals can be spontaneous, candid, conversational, and relaxed in expression. Thomas Hart Benton, for instance, discloses that he never had many students at the Art Students League when he taught there between 1926 and 1935;¹⁰ Fairfield Porter provides us with a possible explanation when he discusses the difference be-

tween Benton's and Boardman Robinson's styles of teaching.¹¹ Isamu Noguchi, stressing his belief in the need for alternative modes of artistic expression, makes an arresting point when he observes that "If Mark Rothko hadn't been tied to his brush . . . he could have had a new life and started all over again."¹² Among the many opinions offered on Alfred Stieglitz, both positive and negative, there were at least two with similar judgments on an aspect of his character. Referring to his father, Edward Weston, Brett Weston said, "When Dad became famous, I think probably Stieglitz resented the fact that he didn't pay tribute to him."¹³ Commented Walker Evans, "I wasn't sycophantic or worshipping of him . . . So he had no time for me at all."¹⁴

However, for all the enlightenment and excitement that can be generated by the information acquired through the oral history and interview process, it must be kept in mind that the contents of books like *Artists in Their Own Words* and *Dialogue with Photography* do not constitute the final word, being only one among other primary sources. Trivia and insignificant items — or "inconsequential persiflage," as Walker Evans termed it¹⁵—have to be identified (although it has also been said that "One man's trivia may be another's gold.")¹⁶ Imprecise recollections, fading memories, repetition, personal biases, and partisan judgments, creative temperaments—all are among the hazards of oral history, though by no means exclusive to it. These are factors that must be recognized and resolved by art historians as they delve into these materials and integrate them with other kinds of sources.

The concept of oral history as it is understood today dates from 1948 at Co-

lumbia University as the brainchild of Professor Allan Nevins of the Department of History. Shortly thereafter, in a fortuitous co-development, the portable tape recorder came into use and became an inseparable partner of the oral history process. In December 1958, the Archives of American Art inaugurated its Oral History Program, the first one on artists and those active in the art-related world of museums and galleries, collectors, and critics. Its historical strengths lie in the period from the late 1930's to the late 1960's. As the director of the Oral History Program of the Archives for a number of years, Paul Cummings conducted many of the interviews himself. A total of two thousand interviews have been completed to date, with most of them transcribed from the original tape.¹⁷ (As far as can be ascertained, Philip Curtis is the only Arizona artist with an interview on file in the Archives.) The transcripts of these interviews are available only after a qualified researcher has received written permission from the artist or his estate to use the material. As archival material, it is subject to restriction to protect the rights and privacy of the interviewee for a certain designated period. Though there is no dictum against publishing oral history interviews, if proper permission is obtained, *Artists in Their Own Words* does depart from standard oral history procedures by having its contents made available in published form outside the customary archival channels.

Dialogue with Photography, on the other hand, is a product of different circumstances, since it was not a part of an archival project. The interviews by Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper—both photographers and active in a host of other photographic activities in England¹⁸—were done for direct publication in a

magazine. It has been pointed out that an interview *per se* does not automatically qualify as oral history.¹⁹ As we have seen, the key factor that must be present to make it a genuine primary source is the element of privacy and confidentiality which permits an interviewee to express himself freely and credibly. This privacy is preserved by holding it in archival reserve for future scholarly consultation and withholding free, immediate, public access to it. *Dialogue with Photography*, therefore, is not oral history in the conventional sense.

There is every sign, however, that oral history is not a static phenomenon and that, as evidenced by the publication of these two volumes, more liberal, freer definitions and practices are evolving. The Archives of American Art, for instance, has recently said that it will be removing restrictions on the use of its interviews.²⁰ And, as will be seen, oral history is being extended into still other formats.

Scholars and researchers should also be aware of other oral history collections in the field of American art and photography. Although not as comprehensive in terms of the number of artists interviewed, in depth and breadth of treatment the individual oral histories often surpass those of the Archives. In the Columbia Oral History Collection, the original and leading oral-history program in the United States, there are, for example, a 185-page transcript of an interview with Thomas Hart Benton in 1972 (compared with the Archives's 68 pages), 348 pages for William Zorach in 1957 (25 pages in the Archives), and 520 pages in 1958 for Max Weber, who was never interviewed by the Archives. Among Columbia's special projects there is also one entitled "New York's Art World," consisting of 1,209 pages of interviews

conducted by Barbaralee Diamonstein (author and contributor to *ARTnews*, among other activities) at the New School for Social Research in New York City, revolving around museum/art gallery relationships with artists in New York.²¹ Memoirs of artists and others connected with American art activities in the Columbia Oral History Collection have received exposure in yet another format. Seven of them (Jack Levine, Isabel Bishop, Holger Cahill, Paulanship, Thomas Hart Benton, Max Weber, and Mahonri Young) are included in a microfiche collection, "The Arts" — a part of the *New York Times Oral History Program* produced by a New York Times subsidiary, the Microfilming Corporation of America. Available since 1972, on microfilm and microfiche, this constitutes a major breakthrough for the dissemination and wider use of oral history interviews.

Other university programs display a characteristic strength of oral history— regional and local coverage. Such are the Archives of Northwest Art, a project of the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington; interviews on art and photography (combined with architecture and literature) in the San Francisco Bay Area, conducted by the Regional Oral History Office of the University of California, Berkeley, and a continuing program in the fine arts, including a major project, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait", a series of thirty interviews carried out under a National Endowment for the Humanities grant between 1975 and 1977 at the University of California, Los Angeles. For several of the interviewees in this project, whose transcripts in some cases range over 500 pages in length, there are also documentary materials as well as an interview on deposit with the Archives of

American art, providing a rich record of their life and art. Both California programs will be available in microformat through the aforementioned Microfilming Corporation of America. A summary report of the UCLA program not only presents the methodology and implementation of a carefully designed operation, but also illuminates clearly the unique purposes of oral history—to provide source material in an undocumented area and to present a multifaceted record of all the forces interacting within a particular setting.²² The non-participation of three artists important to the project (Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, and Peter Voulkos) was lamented, but was possibly an indication of their dislike for this form of communication rather than a lack of cooperation, since the Archives of American Art also has had no interviews with any of them.

One of the salient features in the UCLA Project on the Los Angeles art community represents the latest development in oral history interviewing in art. Just as the portable tape recorder provided the technological means for oral-history to develop and become established, so another new electronic medium has emerged to give it another dimension—the videotape recorder. UCLA videotaped twenty-one of its thirty Los Angeles art community interviews. Beginning in that same period, in 1975, an innovative museum video program was inaugurated by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, which has interviewed on location a total of thirty-five Modernist and Abstract Expressionist artists represented in their collections and exhibitions for showing to patrons and distribution to outside sources.²³ It has termed its collection of video interviews “A Video Vasari.” Commercial gal-

eries in New York, also use this new medium, and the Archives of American Art has recently declared that it, too, will be embarking upon videotape interviews in the near future.²⁴ Here is, then, another ramification of the oral-history process in art—“visual history”—which serves, among other things, to “demythify and rehumanize” an artist,²⁵ thus bringing his audience to a closer level of understanding of him and his work.

The videotape recorder has undoubtedly provided the impetus for and shaped the content and character of a new body of oral histories which has been developing in the last few years in the field of photography. Although the Archives of American Art has interviewed some photographers in the past, since 1975 the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York and the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona both have pursued archival programs unparalleled in the history of oral history interviewing in the arts by displaying, analyzing, and discussing dozens of photographic images in the course of their interviews with photographers. Relevant background interviews with others have also been a part of the complete tape documentation for each photographer. At the International Museum of Photography, transcripts of the material (some of it still in process) are in the form of computer printouts. At the Center for Creative Photography, the audiotapes remain untranscribed and unedited; to oral-history purists, tapes are the true primary source, although transcripts are much preferred by researchers.²⁶ With the expiration of the International Museum of Photography’s two year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1977, activities in photographic oral history are cur-

rently being carried on in the United States only at the Center for Creative Photography in Arizona, where these are funded under the auspices of the Visiting Artists Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Though the two organizations have together compiled somewhat less than a dozen major interviews, the accumulation of material²⁷ is laying the foundations for strong archival resources in photography, thus enabling photo-historians of the future to develop much needed intensive studies in this field.

Has this new resource of oral history had any impact on and acceptance in art-historical research and criticism? How extensively have recent works of scholarship utilized the interviews of, for instance, those conducted by the Archives of American art? Searching the literature of the recent past for substantiating evidence, references were readily found of citations to and use of six—or half—of the interviews included in *Artists in Their Own Words*. They were incorporated in publications ranging from three artist monographs and two anthologies to a catalogue raisonné and an exhibition catalogue.²⁸ On the other hand, listings were found for only two *Camera* interviews in bibliographies.²⁹ And the 1971 Archives interview with Walker Evans was apparently overlooked in two recent publications both of which, however, listed and quoted another magazine interview done about the same time.³⁰ Generally speaking, it would appear that when an autobiographical account has been previously published, an oral history interview may be of somewhat less significance and value. Sam Hunter's recent monumental monograph, *Isamu Noguchi* (New York, 1978) makes liberal use of this artist's autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*

(1968), but none at all of the Cummings' 1973 interview, even though it purported to update and cover subjects not discussed in the autobiography.³¹ In the 1973 interview with Thomas Hart Benton, much of the same ground was covered as in Benton's *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Biography* (1969), but in less detail. Since it has been found that there is generally a median of ten years before oral history materials become published history,³² the potential for future writing in the field of art is promising.

In summary, it can be seen that there exists a fine distinction between oral history and the interview, becoming at times somewhat blurred. But as the Columbia Oral History Collection continues to remind us, the essence of true oral history lies in its guarantee of privacy *at the time* of communication of memories and recollections, and for a certain period thereafter, in order to be assured of obtaining the ultimate truth.³³ With the trend towards a freer dissemination of oral history, some thought should be given to whether this element of protection of the interview source is as vital for oral histories in art where the topics and concerns tend to turn inward and may be less fraught with political sensitivities than in other fields. As for other types of interview situations, some may be journalistic in nature, as in the case of authors and critics interviewing for immediate publication in journals. Or autobiographical, as when a single individual "testifies" at length covering a long span of his life for publication in a full-length book. Or biographical and monographic, where an author develops and gathers his own material on an artist or a theme through the question-and-answer method. But though these interviews may not qualify technically as oral

history in the archival sense, they are raw materials and primary sources in their own right, serving as contemporary, first-hand documentation of an artist and a period. As interviews conducted under unrestricted conditions, they should, of course, be subjected to exacting tests and analysis to determine their historical validity and critical integrity.

The value of such publications as *Artists in Their Own Words* and *Dialogue with Photography* is that they alert the scholarly world to the potential significance of this kind of material for art-historical and photo-historical research. To plumb the depths of an artist through his own verbal self-expression and face-to-face disclosures is to explore new terrain. In the process of interpretation of this newly developed source of information, the literature of art will be immeasurably enriched and begin to assume distinctive characteristics and capabilities that will contribute towards fresh and deeper insights into the achievements of the twentieth-century artist.



Notes

¹Lawrence Alloway, "Artists as Writers, Part One: Inside Information," *Artforum*, Vol. XII, No. 7 (March 1974), p. 33.

²See *Phoebus 2*, pp. 88-96.

³See *Matisse on Art*, ed. by Jack D. Flam (New York, 1973), for texts of interviews, with annotations.

⁴A sampling of titles include: Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York, 1962); Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, English edition (New York, 1971); James Danziger and Barnaby Conrad III, *Interviews with Master Photographers* (1977); Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York, 1975). Books based on taped interviews but written in narrative form are: Jacques Lipchitz with H. H. Arnason, *My Life in Sculpture* (1972), and Nikos Stangos, ed., *David Hockney* (1976).

⁵There is no explanation as to why the twelve particular artists of Cummings's volume were selected from among the hundreds interviewed for the Archives of American Art.

⁶The deceased are: Rockwell Kent, Thomas Hart Benton, Katherine Schmidt, Walker Evans, Fairfield Porter, Robert Smithson, Paul Strand, Man Ray, W. Eugene Smith, Imogen Cunningham, Wynn Bullock, and Minor White.

⁷Picasso is the best known artist-objector to interviews—or any form of interrogation. In fact, one person wrote of him: "Picasso almost has a nervous breakdown in front of a tape recorder."

(Quoted in Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, New York, 1972, Introduction, xix.)

⁸Alloway, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁹This style was criticized by Harold Rosenberg in his *New York Times* review (October 14, 1962) of Katherine Kuh's *The Artist's Voice* as not "stimulating the imagination." Journal interviews by critics do tend to be more complex, aggressive and provocative—qualities also desired by Richard D. McKinzie, author of *The New Deal for Artists* (1973), who wished that Archives of American Art interviewers asked more "positive and provocative" questions than: "Is there anything you want to say about the government art projects?" (p. 195).

¹⁰Paul Cummings, *Artists in Their Own Words* (New York, 1979), p. 37.

¹¹Cummings, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.

¹²Cummings, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹³Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography* (New York, 1979), p. 217.

¹⁴Cummings, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁵Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America*, Vol. LIX, no. 2 (March-April 1971), p. 83.

¹⁶Waddy M. Moore, "Critical Perspectives," *The Oral History Review*, 1978, p. 2.

¹⁷Bibliographical access to these files has been made available through the compilation of guides, with a précis of the contents for each artist, which have

been published periodically in the *Archives of American Art Journal* (Vol. VIII, no. 1, Jan. 1968; Vol. IX, no. 1, Jan. 1969; Vol. XI, nos. 1-4, 1971; Vol. XIV, no. 3, 1974). Each quarterly issue of the *Journal* (until Vol. XVIII, no. 2, 1978) has also contained a column on the ongoing interviews. Two issues of *A Checklist of the Collection* (Sept. 1977 and October 1978) also make note of interviews.

¹⁸Biographical information on these two authors can be found in *Camera*, no. 1 (January 1975), pp. 4 and 11, for Cooper; *Camera*, no. 8 (August 1976), pp. 24 and 33, for Hill.

¹⁹Norman Hoyle, "Oral History," *Library Trends*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (July 1972), p. 62.

²⁰Conversation with Arthur Breton, Curator, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., February 21, 1980.

²¹Spin-offs of these original interviews have taken two forms: (1) showings of the videotapes at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York's Soho district, and (2) publication in book form under the title, *Inside New York's Art World* (Rizzoli, 1979).

²²University of California, Los Angeles, University Library. Oral History Program. *Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait*. Narrative report to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Education Programs, April 30, 1978.

²³Contrary to expectation, museums have not been involved in oral history. When the Brooklyn Museum started conducting interviews with artists speaking before their works of art in the museum

in 1965 ("Listening to Pictures"), it was believed that this was the first time that artists performed in this capacity, as a "single source" of both art work and interpretation. (See *New York Times*, April 26, 1968, p. 45.)

²⁴Conversation with Arthur Breton, February 21, 1980.

²⁵Nancy E. Miller and Christopher Crosman, "A Cure for Videophobia," *Museum News*, Vol. LV, no. 4 (March/April 1977), p. 39.

²⁶Some annotation of the material is made available for the guidance of users. The tapes at the Center may be consulted, free of charge, or rented for non-profit use, subject to copyright and other restrictions. A list of videotapes completed in 1979 and 1980 is available, and a name index to its Videotape Oral History Library has just been issued (see *Center for Creative Photography*, no. 9, June 1979, pp. 20-22).

²⁷As an example of the strength of this material, there are 1,200 pages of transcript in the Paul Vanderbilt interview at the International Museum of Photography.

²⁸The titles of these works are: Dan Burne Jones, *The Prints of Rockwell Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné* (1975); Kim Levin, *Lucas Samaras* (1975); Diane Waldman, *Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective* (1977); Kenworth Moffett, *Kenneth Noland* (1977); Michael Croydon, *Ivan Albright* (1978); *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (1979); and *Fairfield Porter, Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism, 1935-1975* (1979).

²⁹See bibliography for Wynn Bullock

in *The Photograph Collector's Guide* (Boston, 1979), p. 101, and bibliography for 1977 in *Minor White: Rites and Passages* (New York, 1978), p. 139.

³⁰Leslie Katz's "Interview with Walker Evans" in *Art in America* (March 1971) was referred to in the exhibition catalogue, *Walker Evans at Fortune, 1945-1965* (1977) and listed in Walker Evans (1979), in *Aperture's History of Photography* series.

³¹Paul Cummings, "The Oral History Program," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. XIII, no. 4, 1973, p. 20.

³²Louis M. Starr, "Oral History: Problems and Prospects," *Advances in Librarianship*, Vol. II (New York and London, 1971), p. 296.

³³*The Oral History Collection of Columbia University*, ed. by Elizabeth B. Mason and Louis M. Starr (New York, 1979), x.

