

Interviews with artists: a virgin patch of fertile content

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Abstract: Based on the finding that the use of interviews in studies has been disseminated in the field of Art History, Theory and Criticism, this article seeks to warn against the risks of engaging in naive and unsubstantiated approaches, specially when analyzing the material produced. In order to do so, it establishes a premise – regarding the sometimes tense relationship between artists' work and their discourse – and suggests two methodological approaches: content analysis as used in Social Sciences and Oral History. Finally, it points out the need to discuss academic-scientific and similar publications' option for presenting interviews with artists as an autonomous text genre.

Keywords: Interview. Interviews with artists. Artistic creation. Oral History. Content analysis.

After making an extensive series of polaroid self-portraits, Lucas Samaras (Kastoria, Greece, 1936) set out to make a delicious sequence of works that were no less narcissistic: his *autointerviews*. In the most famous of those investigations about himself, in 1971, the author opened the conversation by insistently asking the same question: "Why are you conducting this interview?" The answers, on the other hand, were always different, each offering a particular nuance:

Because interview is [...] a virgin patch of fertile content.

Why are you conducting this interview?

So that I can find out what's been declassified.

Why are you conducting this interview?

So that I can protect myself.

From what?

From people's imagination. [...]

Why are you conducting this interview?

It's a way of releasing guilt.

Why are you conducting this interview?

I want to crystalize the dayly situation of talking to myself.

Why are you conducting this interview?

In order to relax my mind from dayly obsessions.

Why are you conducting this interview?

In order to formalize and isolate myself.

Why are you conducting this interview?

In order to enter the consciousness of others.¹

When Samaras asks himself why he has so much faith in textual discourse, he provided the answer himself: "Words ward off oblivion". The distinct answers given in sequence by the Greek-American artist seem to extrapolate his desire for self-knowledge. They end up serving as – broad and seductive – justifications for interviewing virtually any artist: because this type of conversation is a virgin patch for fertile content, because it can bring out the most secretive, because it protects the interviewee from others' imagination, because it releases guilt, because it systematizes the daily situation of self-reflection, because it relaxes one's mind, because it allows one to enter others' consciousness. That is, because this rather unique genre of speech – built as speech turns in which one asks and the other answers, all sewn with a minimum of objectivity – wards off oblivion. It hopefully works as an antidote to memory erasures.

In different fields of study or in everyday practices, interviews' potential as instruments for knowledge construction has been widely celebrated. Oliveira Bueno emphasizes that today's use of this type of conversation stems from "[...] a long history linked to a philosophical and epistemological tradition that considers dialogic discourse as producer of knowledge and truth".² Master Jorge Luis Borges takes the same route: "[...] the Greeks began to converse, and we have followed since".³

In the more specific field of visual arts – our focus here – interviews are commonly hailed as "sources of *direct* information from the artist".⁴ Conversations with visual artists have been more or less common practices since at least the consolidation of modernity. Ricardo Basbaum, when enunciating the thesis that modern

1. *Another autointerview*, by Lucas Samaras. Originally published in *Samaras Album: autointerview, autobiography, autopolaroid* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Place Edition, 1971); available in STILES, Krstine; SELZ, Peter (eds.). *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1996, p.349-355.

2. BUENO, Cleuza Maria de Oliveira. *Entre-vista: espaço de construção subjetiva*. Porto Alegre: Edipucrs, 2002, p.11-12.

3. BORGES, Jorge Luis; FERRARI, Osvaldo. *En dialogo I*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1998, p.25, my translation.

4. FERREIRA, Glória. FÉLIX, Nelson. *Trilogias – Conversas entre Nelson Félix e Glória Ferreira*. Rio de Janeiro: Pinakotheke, 2005, p.7, emphasis added.

art would correspond to a “particular assemblage” between visual and verbal, underscores the “proliferation of discourses” that comment on propositions made by Courbet, Manet and his contemporaries: “[...] 19th-century men are not silent, they are not dumb and they begin the insistent and continuous activity of speaking and writing based on images”. The author lists: that is the moment of the outbreak not only of art criticism but also of “theoretical texts, artists’ texts, chronicles, biographies, essays, manifestoes and studies in art history”.⁵ He does not mention it, but he could have included *interviews with artists*.

A quick example: Marcel Duchamp’s biographer Calvin Tomkins details how much the French artist was under high pressure by reporters when he moved to New York in 1915. They wanted to know what he had to say about the American woman (“the most intelligent of all”, replied Duchamp), about the already verifiable transfer of the center of diffusion of modern art from France to the United States (“the country of art of the future”, the rebel from Upper Normandy pointed out) and about the war (“Personally, I must say that I am in favor of combat invasions, but with arms crossed”, he joked).⁶

From that moment on the motivation for interviews, almost invariably led by journalists, had to do with building and fixing what Edgar Morin would call the *new Olympus*, where artists embody *Olympians* themselves: beings that mass culture raises to the status of superhumans, like movie stars, sports champions, politicians, writers, musicians and also visual artists, especially painters.⁷ The press tries to present them in a deifying way, while peeping at their private lives and their impressions in search of the most mundane essences, which would stimulate readers’ identification and desires. On the other hand, since the crystallization of the informational paradigm of journalism, which is going to feed mainly on interviews, artists seem to perceive the possibility of using these conversations to publicize their works, their images and their ideas. Tomkins even gets surprised when Duchamp did not take advantage of the insistent presence of reporters around him: “If he wanted, Duchamp could have certainly used the interviews to promote his career as an artist”.⁸

Then the 1950s saw a real boom in this text genre. Glória Ferreira relates that explosion both with the Pop Art phenomenon and its interest in mass communication (The magazine conceived by Andy Warhol was not called *Interview* by chance) and with the decline in manifestoes and art programs of the historical vanguards at that time. One format rose while the other was eclipsed.⁹

In 1965, Katherine Kuh’s launched her work *The Artist’s Voice*, a collection of interviews with 17 artists who were young or at the peak of their production, born or based in the United States. In the interviews, the author points out the possibility of giving voice to those who speak less:

Over the years, art critics and historians have been active in studying the value of these painters and sculptors, discussing their key works, assigning them motives, interpreting them, and “arranging” them into divisions. It is only fair that artists have an opportunity to respond by confirming or denying the allegations about them.¹⁰

Something along these lines is also mentioned by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Researchers say that the “unprecedented” expansion of the traditional categories of painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing in the 1960s and 70s coincides with artists’ adoption of a variety of textual practices, which would include statements and interviews, especially in newspapers and magazines edited by artists themselves. Stiles notes that, although their rigor rarely equals that of critical texts, the interviews would have the notorious advantage of offering “access to spontaneous thought”, absent in “self-conscious theoretical discourses”.¹¹

More recently, in the 1990s, interviews with artists would fill a void, according to Swiss journalist Gabrielle Detterer. Under that perspective, dialogues would be at an intermediate point between scholarly-philosophical essays of high erudition and – immediate and light – more popular forms of communication. Interviews with artists, Detterer stresses, would rather be equivalent to the “desire for transparent communicating”. Their inherent characteristics would be hybridity, fragmentation, authenticity and a polyfunctional spirit. In those conversations, the author says, the artist provides both sophisticated reflections on aesthetics and philosophy of art and divisions

5. BASBAUM, Ricardo. *Além da pureza visual*. Porto Alegre: Zouk, 2007, p.26-27.

6. TOMKINS, Calvin. *Duchamp: uma biografia*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004, p.171-175.

7. MORIN, Edgar. *Cultura de massa no século XX: o espírito do tempo*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1990.

8. TOMKINS, Opus cit., p.175.

9. FERREIRA, Opus cit., p.7.

10. KUH, Katharine. *Diálogo com a arte moderna*. Rio de Janeiro: Lidador, 1965, p.19.

11. STILES; SELZ, Opus cit., p.3-4.

and small facts: “Precise thoughts and miscellany collide. The simultaneity of everyday language and the diction of art theory links separate worlds”.¹²

Detterer points to something that also appears in Ferreira, Kuh or Stiles in almost the same words: the interview emerges as a *direct source* of contact between artists and the public, free from critics’ interpretive interventions. There would be a “return to the artist as the origin of the discourse on art”¹³ in these conversations.

So far, in this article, I have conducted a brief chronological review of what would be a possible history of *interviews with artists*, highlighting characteristics that, throughout the 20th century, have been established as very typical of this quite unique kind of colloquy: their condition as the *most direct source* to artists’ thinking in comparison with other types of texts, their aspect of *promoting* careers and personalities, their access to what is *most spontaneous and most transparent*, their alternative status over the sometimes forceful interpretations of art criticism. However, I should emphasize two principles that I find dear to interviews: a first, more general one, and another one specifically related to dialogues with artists:

(1) an interviewee’s ideas almost never correspond to ready-made, uniform and finished maxims awaiting only the right time to be uttered and give voice to those who do not have it. In best-case scenarios, thoughts take shape precisely in their contact with the other – the one who is willing to ask and listen;

(2) artists, however welcome they may be into the construction of discourses about their works, do not always know exactly what they did. It is better not to over-idealize the strength of what they say. Moreover, they are not necessarily the most authoritative or competent interpreters of their own production. It makes no sense to seek the unveiling of a single, unshakable *truth* in their words.

As a bibliographical review, it should be clarified that the topic of interviews with visual artists, despite the dissemination of their practice, has not gotten much attention in Brazil. Apart from forewords and introductory texts in interview books, attempts to discuss what is unique in those conversations are rare. We have the stimulating reflections of historian and communicologist Ricardo Santhiago, which examine oral sources and art more generally – rather than specifically of

visual arts – and address the issue from another field of observation: unlike me, he understands Oral History as an already consolidated and institutionalized *field of knowledge* rather than a methodology. Santhiago wonders why Oral History devotes so little attention to artistic creation, when the latter would have so much to contribute.¹⁴ This is one of the points in which our approaches converge: I also believe that Oral History provides us with very powerful conceptual and theoretical tools, especially to analyze the statements collected. I see it as a methodology available among others for application in my field of studies: Art History or, more broadly, Art History, Theory and Criticism. Santhiago and I also share the notion that, prior to fixing an ideal system or technique, we should be open to the multifocal research ambitions and the effective exercise of transdisciplinarity. These two issues will be taken up later in this article.

Finally, I come to the moment when I would not like to sound excessively vain, but I will have to quote my own Master’s dissertation and its developments as reference texts. The work, defended in 2006, discussed the use of interviews with artists and its specifics in studies about the creation process.¹⁵ Since I came from an experience of over ten years in the practice of daily journalism dedicated mainly to interviews with artists, I was intrigued by the fact that academics so often chose to naturalize those conversations and rarely made it clear that there was indeed a methodology being applied and that its use should be discussed.

This article resumes issues that were discussed there, seeking to update them in the light of the recent debate with Ricardo Santhiago and my own experience as a professor at

14. SANTHIAGO, Ricardo. História Oral e as artes: percursos, possibilidades e desafios. In: *História Oral*, v. 16, no. 1, Jan./Jun. 2013, p.168.

15. From three case studies, examining works by Anico Herskovits, Jailton Moreira and Maria Helena Bernardes, I used to conduct interviews with these artists and discuss the nature and reading possibilities suggested by the conversations. My main theoretical-disciplinary axis was focused on the studies of work documents, according to views of so-called Genetic Criticism. See VERAS, Eduardo. *Entre ver e enunciar – O uso da entrevista em estudos sobre o processo de criação artística*. Graduate Program in Visual Arts. Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. Master’s Dissertation. Porto Alegre, 2006. Afterwards I published the chapter in: VERAS, Eduardo. Diante do enigma. In: ASSIS BRASILEIRO, Luiz Antonio de; DOVAL, Camila Canali; SILVA, Camila Gonzatto da; SILVA, Gabriela (eds.). *A escrita criativa – Pensar e escrever literatura*. Porto Alegre: Edipucrs, 2012, p.138-157. More recently I resumed those issues in VERAS, Eduardo. História Oral e História da Arte: aproximações. In: SANTHIAGO, Ricardo (ed.). *História oral e arte: narração e criatividade*. São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2016, p.137-162, and in a communication at the 26th Meeting of the Brazilian Committee of Art History, Salvador, 2017, still unpublished as text.

12. DETTERER, Gabriele (ed.). *Art collection – Artists’ interviews and statements in the Nineties*. Ravena: Danilo Montanari/Exit/Zona Archives Editori, 1997, p.12.

13. Idem, *ibidem*, p.12, emphasis added.

the UFRGS Institute of Arts, teaching specific courses on interviews with artists and following research conducted by Undergraduate and Graduate students.¹⁶

My specific focus in this article – I finally announce it – is on interviews with artists within an academic context. However interesting they may be, I will not discuss propositions such as those made by Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who thinks of interviews as *performance zones* that can take the form of *conversation marathons* and often give rise to books or curatorial projects.¹⁷ Nor will I approach artists who use interviews or auto-interviews in their works, like British artist Michael Craig-Martin¹⁸ or Lucas Samaras as already mentioned. However, I will keep in mind the notion that the interview can function as a virgin patch of fertile content.

II

Interviews with artists may not yet be a fever or a fad in academic circles in Brazil and abroad, but in any case they are widely disseminated in the textual narratives and other modes of discourse: dialogues, especially when they focus on authors' creation processes and motivations, appear as a really fine instrument for knowledge creation. As an example, we might examine, although briefly, works from the UFRGS Bachelor of Arts History and its correlate in the Graduate Program in Arts at the same institution: the emphasis on Art History, Theory and Criticism.¹⁹ Of the 34 PhD theses defended there since the first class started in 2005, 18 resorted to interviews.²⁰ That is more than half. Among master's dissertations in the same

period from 2005 to 2017, the figures are even more stunning: 38 out of 63 new masters in the emphasis on Art History, Theory and Criticism used interviews – that is, more than 60%.²¹ In the Bachelor's Degree in Art History, since the first class graduated in 2013 to the most recent one in 2016, ten out of 19 students used interviews in their final monographs.²²

While the figures stand out for the number of academic works that rely on interviews among their documentary sources, the data can be even more surprising. Few of those researchers submit the statements they help to create to some sort of systematic analysis. Of the 18 theses whose sources include interviews, only four carry out some kind of critical analysis of the material. Of the 38 dissertations with interviews, only six say that the statements are subjected to some treatment. Only one of the ten final course works announces such reflective disposition. It is certainly possible that, even without making it explicit, undergraduate and graduate researchers subjected their oral sources to some kind of judgment. They probably did not. Or at least they were not aware of doing it.

This may result in certain methodological weakness, certain lack of rigor. There is a risk of naively treating the statements collected while wasting their nuances, selections typical of memory-based narratives and their inevitable forgotten points. Hence, by neglecting a more systematized analysis we often end up with less vigorous interpretations. The general quality of the works tends to be compromised.

Having said that, I come to the heart of this communication: the suggestion of at least two different interpretive models that would help avoid these weaknesses when addressing interviews. However, before moving on to them I propose adopting a potentially encouraging assumption.

I recommend that, during the distinct steps of conversations with artists, from preparation to the interview itself, and finally, when examining the material, researchers keep in mind that

16. *Laboratory of Research in Art History* is a mandatory 60-hour course focused on research using interviews. It is in the 6th semester in the curriculum of the Art History Degree. I taught the special elective course *Interviews with Artists: Uses, Specificities and Methods* to Master's and PhD classes at PPGAV/UFRGS in 2013 and 2017.

17. Obrist discusses the concepts of *performance zone* and *interview marathon* in an interview with Marcelo Rezende, in OBRIST, Hans Ulrich. *Arte agora!: em cinco entrevistas*. São Paulo: Alameda, 2006, p.99-114.

18. At the installation *An Oak Tree*, first presented in 1973, Craig-Martin includes, on the wall, next to a glass of water, an auto-interview in which he narrates and discusses how he transformed that object into a tree.

19. I choose these courses in which I teach not only because of my closeness, but rather because the theses and dissertations defended there as of 2005 are available on the program's website: <https://www.ufrgs.br/ppgav/defesas/#page>. The same applies to Final Course Works of the UFRGS Bachelor of Art History, available at Lume: <http://www.lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/15757>.

20. In the same period, in the same program, 57 PhD theses were defended in Visual Poetics. Although three of them included interviews among the sources submitted for examination, they will not be addressed here because our discussion is restricted to works in Art History, Theory and Criticism.

21. In the same period, in the same program, 114 Master's Dissertations were defended in Visual Poetics, and six of them used interviews. They will not be counted here because this analysis only addresses studies in Art History, Theory and Criticism.

22. In the three cases cited (theses, dissertations and final course works), the interviews are not restricted to artists. Interviewees chosen by PhD, Masters' and Bachelor of History of Art students at UFRGS include curators, art critics, art dealers, collectors, specialized journalists, artists' family members, artists-professors' former students, managers of public and private spaces, and finally, *vernissage habitués*.

there are distances, differences and tensions between *image* and *word*, between *verbal* and *visual*. I am not saying that it is imperative to review, at each interview conducted, ancient – and sometimes passionate – debates such as *Ut pictura poesis erit, paragone* or *Laocoonte*,²³ but their warning should be kept alive: except for some fascinating works in conceptual or post-conceptual art,²⁴ work and text are *almost* never the same.

Perhaps it would be even more appropriate to emphasize a development of this point, which concerns the coexistence, not always harmonious, between artistic creation itself and the discourses about it, especially those coming from artists themselves, whether they are descriptions, reports of *intentions* or even interpretive suggestions. Artists themselves often warn us against the inconvenience of mixing those generally diverse instances.

As Louise Bourgeois comments:

Artists' words must always be interpreted carefully. The finished work is often strange, and it sometimes represents the opposite of what the artists felt or wanted to express when they began. At best, artists do what they can instead of what they want. Once the battle is over and the damage is faced, the result can be surprisingly tedious – but sometimes it is surprisingly interesting. [...] Artists who discuss such a hidden sense of their work are usually describing literary and secondary subjects. If the core of their original impulse is in any place, it is in the work itself.²⁵

Likewise, Waltercio Caldas says:

If I stand as an advocate of my work, I have to advocate the fact that it is being minimized in this situation [of an interview] and that myself and my statement are being valued more than the view of my work. Since I think it is in the experience of seeing the work, of being in front of work, that everything is justified, it is important to keep this parameter.²⁶

Umberto Eco, rather as a novelist than a semiotist and essayist, says:

23. These debates, which have accompanied Art History from Antiquity to the present, are very briefly addressed in my dissertation: VERAS, Opus cit, p.29-30. Excerpts from the original texts that fueled the *paragone* and *Laocoön* debate are available in LICHTENSTEIN, Jacqueline (ed.). *A pintura: textos essenciais. Vol. 7: O paralelo das artes*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2005. See also GREENBERG, Clement. Rumo a um mais novo Laocoonte. In: FERREIRA, Glória; COTRIM, Cecília (eds.). *Clement Greenberg e o debate crítico*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 1997, p.45-59.

24. *Post-conceptual* is a concept formulated by art historian Alexander Alberro to describe certain contemporary art strongly based on discursiveness and its contexts of establishment. See ALBERRO, Alexander; BUCHMANN, Sabeth (eds.). *Art after conceptual art*. Cambridge/London/Viena: The MIT Press/General Foundation, 2006.

25. BOURGEOIS, Louise. *Destruição do pai/Reconstrução do pai*. São Paulo, Cosac Naify, 2000, p.66.

26. VERAS. Opus cit., p.12.

There is the text [*the work of art*], which produces its own effects in terms of meaning. Irrespective of my will [*as an author*], the question arises, ambiguity appears [...]. The author should kill himself after writing the work to smooth the way to the text.²⁷

It happens that the same artists/authors, after some time and having settled the emotions of creation, tend to modulate their restrictions that were so severe at first sight. Somehow they allude to other possibilities of enunciation and reading of what they would have to say. According to Bourgeois, “artists must say what they feel. My work grows from the clash between the isolated individual and the group's shared consciousness”.²⁸ Caldas says: “I can talk about a subject that interests me or the subject that raises my concerns”.²⁹ Eco sustains: “Authors should not interpret. But they can tell how and why they wrote it”.³⁰

Despite imperfections or contradictions of discourse, fortunately because they exist, artists'/authors' statements – when examined with acuity – can be stimulating and challenging. This premise, more than a magical key to hermeneutic fabulations, would work as some kind of warning that statements about creation should not be *literary* and *secondary* as Bourgeois emphasizes, but grow in *consciousness shared* with their interlocutors. With some methodological support, they will help clean up the process in which art history, art criticism, different interpreters, and the general public extract sugar from molasses.

III

In the courses I have been teaching about uses, specifics and methodology for interviews in the field of art, whether at the Bachelor's Degree in Art History or in the Graduate Program in Visual Arts, right after discussing the tensions between work and discourse on the work I propose to examine concepts, foundations and technical devices of content analysis – a methodology that is dear to Social Sciences – and Oral History. There would certainly be other possibilities, such as *discourse analysis*, which comes from Linguistics. I believe, however, that content analysis and Oral History, if

27. ECO, Umberto. *Apostillas a El nombre de la rosa*. Buenos Aires: Lumen/Flor, 1987, p.14, my translation.

28. BOURGEOIS, Opus cit, p.66.

29. VERAS, Opus cit., p.12.

30. ECO, Opus cit, p.15.

well understood and well employed, offer sufficiently strong principles for careful studies in Art History. Both work with the notion that researchers must keep a live consciousness of the subjective, relational, provisional and circumstantial character of the interviews. Interviews thus emerge as texts woven by two people, in a particular context, according to interests present at that particular moment.

Some comparison, however brief, between journalistic practice and academic research, should clarify the importance of methodology application. Scientists in the Humanities, unlike press professionals, cannot afford unconsciousness. Jean-Pierre Rioux compares: the journalist “[...] collects material in any way and invents sources without being able to treat them”.³¹

In conducting an interview, a journalist is authorized – by practice itself and the conventions of the field – to pressure, interrupt and induce the interviewee. American reporter and Professor of Journalism Hugh Sherwood thinks the interview needs to be “productive” and therefore it would be lawful to force a “reasoned” statement.³² When transcribing and interview, correcting bad speech habits and redundancies typical of oral expression is not only legitimate but recommended. When editing the material, for the purposes of communicability or better narrative flow, the order of questions and answers is changed. Whole parts disappear.

In different fields of the Humanities, in turn, interviewers are consensually advised to cultivate patience and tolerance, and avoid being clever and astute. In the early 1940s, the Social Sciences – notably Roethlisberger and Dickson – set principles that still guide the use of conversations for research purposes: interviewers, although “cleverly critical”, should not advise interviewees or judge them or argue with them.³³ Sociology and Oral History manuals seem to agree on what should be expected from one who conducts the dialogue in any situation: the creation of a climate of professional solidarity, both sincere and fraternal; attention to the interviewee’s speech; permission to let memories flow without major interruptions; acceptance of possible digressive derangements; careful renewal of

research themes; never recording the other’s speech without prior consent. In transcription, preserving the original meanings of what one has been entrusted with rather than literality.

In comparison with journalism, even greater distances extend when one considers the current perception about the interview’s reason d’être. Journalists usually seek the truth as *something that has happened*. Highly conscientious ones believe that they will arrive at it through well-made investigation, thorough examination of sources, obsessive checking of details and exhaustive crossing of different versions. Here the truth will hardly be understood as representation of events, a – partial and provisional – representation that interviewees build about the world or themselves. The reporter’s illusion is, in most cases, to reach the facts rather than an *image* of them. The interviewee emerges as someone capable of revealing something concrete, real, objective. Armando Nogueira used to say that the interview tries to “draw out the truth”.³⁴ Boris Casoy compares journalists to corkscrews: they must “bring information to the surface”.³⁵ Ricardo Kotscho compares interviews to dating: “The interviewee has to be won over to say what you want to know”.³⁶ Mario Sergio Conti warns about the need for the reporter to “[...] know how to get the best [the interviewee] has”.³⁷ Taking, winning over, bringing up, drawing out. There would be something that the interviewee has and the interviewer wants to make public.

The current theoretical development of the Humanities does not authorize this kind of search for factual truth without incorporating subjects’ *elaborations*. In his *Oral History Handbook*, Sebe Bom Mehy mentions the impossibility of *retrieving* memory. Memory, he notes, is not something concrete that can be released:

[...] what is said [*about oral testimonials*] is that they are often inaccurate, full of emotional interferences and several biases. Contrary to popular belief, it is exactly the set of those changes that matters. In addition, it dwells in the emotion and even in the passion of those who narrate the subjectivity in which oral history is interested.³⁸

31. RIOUX, Jean-Pierre. Entre História e Jornalismo. In: CHAUVEAU, Agnès; TETART, Phillipe (eds.) *Questões para a História do Presente*. Bauru: Edusc, 1999, p.121.

32. SHERWOOD, Hugh C. *A entrevista jornalística*. São Paulo: Mosaico, 1981, p.79.

33. BLANCHET, Alain; GOTMANN, Anne. *L'enquête et ses méthodes: l'entretien*. Paris: Nathan, 1992, p.67, my translation.

34. CRIPA, Marcos (ed.). *Entrevista e ética: uma introdução*. São Paulo: Edusc, 1998, p.16.

35. Idem, *ibidem*, p.95.

36. Idem, *ibidem*, p.92.

37. CONTI, Mario Sergio. *Memórias do presente*. Originally published on the website *nominimo*, now available at <http://www.observatoriodaimprensa.com.br/artigos/asp170620035.htm>. Accessed on September 20, 2017.

38. MEHY, José Carlos Sebe Bom. *Manual de História Oral*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2002, p.47.

IV

Although some Oral History enthusiasts refer to it as a discipline or a field of knowledge, the Brazilian Oral History Association itself stresses its characteristics as a research *methodology*, that is, something that establishes and orders working procedures.³⁹ It dates back to the postwar period, coinciding with the spread of good recording equipment in the United States and Europe and the willingness to systematize testimonies about the experience of World War II. Allan Nevins set up the first archives and coined the term Oral History in 1948 at Columbia University in New York. The most direct inspiration came from the Chicago School of Sociology, where 30 years ago testimonies were collected in the form of *life histories*. At first, interviewees were distinguished figures, but from the 1950s on dozens of American associations and universities started to listen to ordinary people in addition to the elites. In the next decade, the so-called *New Left* of British historiography, in the spirit of counterculture, understood Oral History as “counter-history” or “history seen from below”, choosing its interviewees preferably among “those silenced in official records”.⁴⁰ In Brazil, its consolidation took place in the 1970s thanks to Rio de Janeiro’s Getúlio Vargas Foundation, still the largest reference center in the systematization of oral sources in the country.

In theoretical terms, the practice of Oral History seeks support in authors who discuss and question the universe of – individual and collective – recollections, the processes of remembering events and the different ways of updating the past in the present – which is the case of works by David Lowenthal, Maurice Halbwachs and Michael Pollak, among others. The methodology also considers the risks of what Pierre Bourdieu called the *biographical illusion*. According to the French sociologist, when people are asked to share an experience or tell their own lives, the account “[...] is always or at least partly based on the concern to ascribe meaning, to make it reasonable, to draw out a logic that is both retrospective and forward-looking, consistent and constant”.⁴¹ In Ales-

sandro Portelli’s synthesis, memory as it is usually understood by Oral History is not restricted to “[...] a passive storage of facts”; it is rather “an active process of significations”.⁴² The Italian literary critic, one of the greatest international references in the use of Oral History, emphasizes the sort of nuances that a researcher must perceive in narratives: “Oral sources tell us not only what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they have done”.⁴³

Finally, it should be emphasized that there is no magic formula in this methodology to protect us against uncertainties and misinterpretations. When analyzing the material available, Oral History does not provide for a rigid scheme with steps to be followed; at most, it warns us to comply with the, say, *classic* procedures for criticizing sources that are dear to History as a discipline: an interview, like other documents, (1) must be examined in terms of its internal coherence and its context of appearance; (2) it needs to be compared with other sources (not necessarily in search of what would be a possible *factual truth*, but perhaps precisely in an attempt to value or understand its fictional potential); and finally, (3) it must be observed in a broad historical-contextual framework – never in isolation.

Content analysis would be an effective alternative for those who will not give up more orthodox and safe methodologies. Widely adopted in the field of social sciences since the late 19th century, content analysis describes and interprets countless documents. Broadly speaking, in the case of interviews, it can be presented as a critical approach to interviewees’ statements based on fragmenting discourses into units of analysis (recording units or meaning units) and their categorization, by similarity or analogy, in a process of classification that seems both consistent and stimulating.

This treatment, which is both quantitative and qualitative, seeks to understand explicit or latent meanings at a level beyond a faster reading.⁴⁴ Roque Moraes observes that such

39. Created in April 1994 in Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian Oral History Association (ABHO) promotes national research meetings every two years and regularly publishes a scientific journal. On its official website, it presents its purpose: <http://www.historiaoral.org.br/>.

40. MEHY, Opus cit, pp. 88-99.

41. BOURDIEU, Pierre. “A ilusão biográfica”. In: AMADO, Janaína; FERREIRA, Marieta de Moraes Ferreira (eds.). *Usos & abusos da História Oral*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1996, p.184.

42. PORTELLI, Alessandro. “O que faz a história oral diferente”. In: *Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduados em História e do Departamento de História – PUC SP*. Projeto História, São Paulo, no. 14, Feb. 1997, p.33.

43. Idem, *ibidem*, p.31.

44. A more detailed presentation of content analysis is not possible here. Reference authors on this methodology include Grawitz, Krippendorff, Mucchielli, Olabuenaga, Ispizua and F. Rosemberg. A good synthesis, including a step-by-step guide for its application, can be found in MORAES, Roque. “Análise de conteúdo”. In: *Revista Educação*. Porto Alegre, v. 22, no. 37, p.7-32, 1999.

methodology develops in a cyclical and circular, never sequential or linear way: “Data do not speak for themselves. We have to draw meaning out of them”.⁴⁵ “Periodic return to data and progressive refinement of categories in search for increasingly explicit meanings constitute a process that is never really completed, in which each cycle can reach new layers of understanding”.⁴⁶ Less enthusiastic authors, in reviewing that methodology, will emphasize that its effectiveness will always depend on the researcher’s *experience*, both in conducting interviews and in analyzing them.⁴⁷ An example of good application of content analysis in the field of Art History, Theory and Criticism is Luísa Martins Waetge Kiefer’s master’s dissertation. In her approach to the historical and social process of construction of what would be a “young artist” in today’s world, she sent questionnaires to and received responses from 50 artists, critics and curators, and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six young artists. The categories of content analysis ended up underlying the most interpretative part of her dissertation.⁴⁸

In this article I tried to emphasize the need for researchers to be more careful when interpreting the material produced than when preparing or conducting interviews with artists. Interviews take place one way or another. As Consuelo Lins points out, there is no manual for the right questions or a safe way for a better conversation: “Each time an interview takes place, different resolutions emerge, with their rights and wrongs”.⁴⁹ widely hailed documentary artist and exemplary interviewer Eduardo Coutinho adds that much of what happens at an interview inevitably has to do with chance and improvisation: “You ask a question and you later regret it. Or you do not ask it and then you realize you should have. Or you ask a stupid question”.⁵⁰ The material will never be perfect. However, I am

convinced that certain concepts, certain theoretical references and certain methodological precision – coming from History, the Social Sciences or other fields of knowledge – tend to lead us to a more consistent use of sources built in dialogue, with more dense and more stimulating results.

My purpose here was not to establish a single or ideal model for critical treatment of oral sources or the formulation of an *Oral Art History*. Rather, I reaffirm my belief in a methodology in permanent construction, which depends on the combination and recombination of different references coming from different disciplines, under a multifocal perspective. Luckily it will overcome traditional borders of frozen fields of knowledge. As Francis Ponge suggests, a method that is made as it goes, very little each day: “A little thing, almost nothing, but with style”.⁵¹

V

It would be necessary to include a final topic in this reflection on the uses and specificities of interviews with artists in the disciplinary field of Art History, Theory and Criticism. This is a new issue and, as far as I can see, it has not yet been discussed or even identified, and it is awaiting an inescapable problematization: interviews with artists have been increasingly often presented as an *autonomous text genre* in scholarly-scientific publications – or in publications very close to them. We could consider the dossier in this very edition of *Porto Arte Magazine*, but I will mention three other examples that are already circulating and recognized.

The first one is Glória Ferreira’s book *Entrefalas* – a compilation of 13 interviews conducted by the author at different moments of her intellectual history, between 1980 and 2000. In the introduction, she reviews her interest in this type of dialogue since her return to Brazil after a long period in exile, and she reaffirms her conviction that interviews as a text genre “... guarantee, in the universe of art, artists’ speech not subordinated to judgment, to critical evaluation, thus placed in the wide movement of artists’ taking over the word”.⁵² Interest-

45. Idem, *ibidem*.

46. Idem, *ibidem*.

47. The topic is discussed by authors such as Rocha and Deusará, Campos and Turato, and Nehmey. A review of those critiques is available in CAVALCANTE, Ricardo Bezerra; CALIXTO, Pedro; PINHEIRO, Marta Macedo Kerr. Análise de conteúdo: considerações gerais, relações com a pergunta de pesquisa, possibilidades e limitações do método. In: *Inf. & Soc. João Pessoa*, v. 24, no. 1, p.13-18, Jan./Apr. 2014.

48. KIEFER, Luísa Martins Waetge. *Jovem artista: a construção de um duplo mito*. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Visuais. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Master’s Dissertation. Porto Alegre, 2013. See specially Chapter 4, “O jovem artista a partir do jovem artista”, p.79-123.

49. LINS, Consuelo. *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2004, p.146.

50. VERAS, Eduardo. Enfim, uma pessoa interessante. In: *Cultura. Zero Hora*.

Porto Alegre, 4 Feb. 2006, p.6-7.

51. PONGE, Francis. *Métodos*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1997, p.27.

52. FERREIRA, Glória. *Entrefalas*. Porto Alegre: Zouk, 2011, p.7. Of course the author is not considering that even those interviews conducted by her may be later submitted to critical evaluation and treatment by different authors, whether or not linked to academia. Therefore she reiterates the meaning of the interview as an autonomous text genre.

ingly, in her interview with Helena Trindade, both commented on the fact that it was the artist who proposed the interview format to the other. Helena remarks: “A well conducted interview brings out a lot of things that, if it were not for that opportunity for the person to speak, would not happen. Speech is drawn to certainty. Writing is one thing after another, there’s lots of editing, going back and forth”.⁵³

The second example is researcher and art critic Felipe Scovino’s *Arquivo contemporâneo* – an anthology of 13 recent interviews he conducted between 2006 and 2009. In the opening text, he makes a comparison similar to Glória Ferreira’s: “I propose nothing more than to remove the – excessive – third-person speech of the critic and include the artist’s writing or statement”.⁵⁴ Further on, in the same text, Scovino specifies: “By organizing an interview book, I do not want to assert that criticism is undergoing a crisis... or [that] artists’ words are the only truth about their work”.⁵⁵ At the end of the preface, the author underscores:

This collection of texts points out that the artist’s role converges to the place of the art critic, not in the sense of canceling the former’s role, but of completing this critical circuit of thought. The artist is not only the subject who creates the art object, but he or she also thinks and reflects about this process and its place in the art circuit, establishing a critical discourse on the changes in art practices and contemporaneity.⁵⁶

The third reference is the book *No calor da hora – Dossiê jovens artistas paulistas (década de 1980)* [In the heat of the moment – Dossier young artists from São Paulo (1980s)]. After 25 years, the volume gathers 28 interviews conducted by Tadeu Chiarelli between 1986 and 1987 when he worked as a researcher at São Paulo Cultural Center. In the introduction, Chiarelli explains the criteria for his choice of artists and estimates that the joint reading of the statements may build “[...] a panel of São Paulo’s art environment from points of view that are not always taken into account”.⁵⁷

In different ways, with different levels of intensity, the three authors declare their intention to provide the public with less unusual but critical speeches – above all free of interferences other than those of interviewees and interviewers.

It has already been said in this very article that interviews with artists are proliferating. In Brazil, many publications have featured these question-and-answer sequences. Some of them have even become references: Lisette Lagnado’s with Iberê Camargo and Leonilson, Angélica de Moraes’s with Regina Silveira, Gerardo Mosquera’s with Cildo Meireles, Glória Ferreira’s with Néelson Félix. What stands out in these compilations by Ferreira, Scovino and Chiarelli is the option for an *anthology* format, which underlines the interview’s potential as an independent text genre. In all those cases, it is no longer about a monographic book on an artist in which the interview is usually a text among others, although sometimes it is the most important one. The status of anthologies makes these three books actual *interview books*. The academic-scientific status of their authors should also be emphasized. Although Ferreira, Scovino and Chiarelli are recognized for their experience as critics and curators, they are also widely recognized as professors and researchers with significant work in Brazil’s university environment in the area of Visual Arts, Art Criticism and Art History.⁵⁸

Hence the importance of debating a formal issue that accompanies the interviews published in these three books: conversations take on a journalistic format, the so-called *ping-pong*, or more intimately *ping*: questions and answers transcribed one after the other, making up a dialogue to be read. There is certainly no drama in that choice, but the preference for that model should raise some questions: what does this academic-scientific option imply? Do we take into account that this pattern comes from journalistic practice? Are emblematic paradigms of journalistic ping-pong also guiding academic ping-pong? Will we embrace our appreciation for the most spectacular,⁵⁹ the sensational, for edition that improves what was said by eliminating redundancies and bad habits typical of oral expression, which changes the order of the questions and makes the text so different from the interviews that come as annexes and appendices in theses and dissertations? Or

53. Idem, *ibidem*, p.165.

54. SCOVINO, Felipe. *Arquivo contemporâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2009, p.7.

55. Idem, *ibidem*, p.10.

56. Idem, *ibidem*, p.14.

57. CHIARELLI, Tadeu. *No calor da hora – Dossiê jovens artistas paulistanos (década de 1980)*. Belo Horizonte: C/Arte, 2011, p.20.

58. Glória Ferreira holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Paris I. She is currently a collaborator professor at the Graduate Program in Visual Arts at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Felipe Scovino holds a PhD in Visual Arts from UFRJ; she is now a professor at that institution and she coordinates the Graduate Program in Visual Arts. Tadeu Chiarelli holds a PhD in Visual Arts from the University of São Paulo and is a full professor at that school.

59. On that, see Mucchielli: “A entrevista jornalística é um espetáculo, e o tema posto ou proposto é escolhido em função do público”. In: MUCCHIELLI, Roger. *A entrevista não diretiva*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1995, p.12.

are we unwilling to compromise? If we do so in the name of clarity, elegance, comprehensiveness, attractiveness, of the broadest autonomy of the interview as text, will that be taken into consideration if we analyze the material?

I am not advocating that we avoid the *ping* format in non-journalistic texts. On the contrary: I am sympathetic to it at first, but I warn that this should be better observed and debated – that is, problematized.

I remember that one of the artists interviewed for my Master's research, reading the work already done, noticed that I had missed the opportunity to include the transcribed interviews into the dissertation's main text. They were exhaustively quoted and dissected throughout the text, but they appeared in full ping-pong format only in the appendixes. Recently, a close friend, in her PhD research, had this boldness I lacked and alternated pings with the chapters she wrote herself. The panel complained about that almost unanimously.

It is strange that the format, despite its success, despite being included in academic-scientific journals, whether in regular sections or in occasional appearances, does not receive the same score in Capes' evaluations. The institution's recent four-year report reaffirms that in Graduate Programs' publications "[...] reviews and interviews may be published, but are not considered as original articles".⁶⁰ If this criterion is maintained, in the next evaluation this article will score fewer points than the interview I conducted with Maria Helena Bernardes for this very edition of Porto Arte.

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60. Capes's Four-Year Evaluation Report 2013-2016/ Four-Year Report 2017. Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior. Brasília, Sept. 2017. Available at <https://docs.google.com/viewer?ea=v&pid=sites&srcid=Y2FwZXMuZ292LmJyGF2YWxpYWVhby1xdWFKcmllbmFsfGd40mZiNWQ0YjdYQyNzVIZA>. Accessed on Sept. 25, 2017.

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