

Times to meet

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Translated by Roberto Cataldo Costa

Abstract: The article discusses the role of interviews throughout the history of art, especially from the 1950s onwards. It points out the particularity of interviews with artists as first-person speech independent of critical evaluation and its decisive place in art criticism and history.

Keywords: Interview. Statements. Photography. Critical Discourse. Art History.

As we know, several meanings are ascribed to an interview, such as the action of interviewing or being interviewed, of conversation between two or more people for a certain purpose. There is also the journalistic interview, which is the most usual tool to inform the public or an interview for hiring an employee – the most common method. We also have countless interviews with personalities, intellectuals or artists who usually become books, such as Jackson Pollock's, Michel Foucault's, Didi-Huberman's and many others.

In the general field of communications, Clarice Lispector declared that she “was an amateur and wanted to remain an amateur”.¹ She conducted wonderful interviews over 30 years, which were featured in several publications.² According to her, by bringing together poetic writing and journalistic communication, personal speeches and many statements, those conversations reveal the “unexpected in interviewees”.

As a first-person speech, interviews with artists saw strong development after World War II with the new possibilities for recording, which ensure authenticity. The almost always necessary relegation of what should be said is transferred to the work itself. The direct and immediate nature of the information in which aesthetic considerations, studio practices and biographical elements are combined is not subordinated to the act of evaluation.

There are conversations including different artists, such as Cézanne's with artists and critics, among them Joaquim

Gasquet, Emile Bonnard, Ambroise Vollard, Gustave Geffroy. According to the book's presentation,³ some texts in the *Interprétations* section are “conversations with Cézanne fabricated by the author” (...) or “an elaborate commentary on information acquired during effective meetings with the artist”.⁴ That certainly requires strong trust between the painter and his correspondents, while revealing even positive evaluation comments.

The interview's authority, however, as direct information and addressed to the general public, is derived from what the artist does rather than from critical evaluation. Therefore, it is part of the many artists' texts wrote throughout history. Texts that depend on semantic variation of the title of artist, diversification of its meaning, and its subordination to a notion of “art” that is historically determined in a precise cultural context.

Each historical period has thus produced different types of artists' writing, revealing both the artists' sociocultural status and changes in language, presenting different ways it has been inscribed in art history. These writings can be related to the origin of the meaning of personal creation in the 15th century, with the transition from “painter” to “artist”, from “craft-work” to “fine arts”.

Public appreciation and the process of intellectualization of the artist establish new relations with the works and with the notion of their affiliation to the artist's personality.⁵

Radically distant from the so-called “tradition of artists' verbal shyness” as Goldwater points out in his pioneering *Artists on Art*,⁶ the continuous argument developed by artists' maps nodal points of the work process present in their praxis. That process is no longer based on a clear separation between the tasks of direction and execution, between intellectual and the manual work.

In different ways, such as manifestos, letters, interviews, fictional texts, critical texts and specially essays, they are integrated into the poetics of each work and end up joining the domain of critical discourse and art history.

3. *Conversations avec Cézanne*. Paris: Macula, 1978.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Cf. Nathalie Heinich, *Du peintre à l'artiste. Artisans et académiciens à l'âge classique*. Paris: Minuit, 1993.

6. Robert Goldwater, Marco Treves (eds.). *Artists on Art: from the XIV to the XX Century*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1945.

1. Clarice Lispector. Last interview to reporter Júlio Lerner, TV Cultura, 1977. At <http://www.revistabula.com/503-a-ultima-entrevista-de-clarice-lispector>.

2. Clarice Lispector. *Entrevistas*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2007.

According to Lawrence Alloway, interviews are contemporary of early statements (“a hilarious mix of aphorism and slogans”),⁷ especially by Pop Art stars who have proliferated since the 1950s, particularly in the United States, due to the expansion of books, magazines and illustrated catalogs. Andy Warhol is a unique case: he used to call his tape recorder “my wife” and left about 3,000 magnetic tapes and cassettes in addition to his *A novel by Andy Warhol*, (1968), including 80 hours of conversations with Ondine and considered by him “a kind of ambience literature”.

The relationship between art and photography, in turn, creates a new degree of intimacy with the work process. An example of that is the famous series published by *Art News* magazine, “So-and-so-Paints a Picture”.⁸ The magazine brought together a writer and a photographer to map the development of an artist’s work – of which the most famous is that of Pollock and Hans Namuth. The documentation of the work process evokes preparatory studies and sketchpads, and eventually results in the artist’s emergence as a performer.

Rosalind Krauss⁹ points out the critical dimension, by the very means of photography, of photographer Hans Namuth’s work on Pollock. Namuth presents the artist in full action, revealing the relationships between the forms inscribed and the inscription field present in his work process. The photographs contributed decisively to Harold Rosenberg’s analysis of the event in the “arena” of real time and space – the foundations of his conception of *Action Painting*. It also introduces the process as a decisive element in both the constitution and the reception of the work.

Another interview that deeply marked the American scene was that of artist Tony Smith with Samuel Wagstaff in 1966. It was taken as a background by Michael Fried in one of the most controversial and decisive texts against minimal art.¹⁰ Tony Smith is credited with the “annunciation of the death” of art when he described his trip on a desert road. According to

Fried, “Smith’s account of his experience on the road reveals theater’s profound hostility toward the arts and demonstrates it precisely in the absence of the object and in what replaces it, which could be called the theatricality of objectivity”.¹¹ For the author, close to the Greenbergian formalism, that condition defined the theatricality of “literalist” art, which would then be “the negation of art”.¹²

More recently, several anthologies of interviews with artists have been published, such as the great book *Talking Art. Interviews with artists since 1976*.¹³ Iwona Blazwick, in an essay published in that book – “Anatomy of the Interview” – describes interviews as “irresistible” and says that the “notion of revelation through verbal exchanges has emerged from psychoanalysis”.¹⁴ Or Hans Ulrich Obrist’s several books¹⁵ resulting from some 1,400 hours of interviews with artists, critics and curators as well as other personalities in the international cultural scene.

Still regarding the many interviews with artists that became indispensable material in art history, even serving as didactic material, let us remember the famous conversation between Marcel Duchamp and Pierre Cabanne,¹⁶ about which the artist declared: “*Cela coule de source*”.

Another common phenomenon – not only internationally but also in Brazil – is the publication of interviews in books edited by artists. Both in contemporary texts and in those of specific periods, artists’ words are inscribed in the *corpus* of reflections, which is an indication of the decisive inscription of first-person speech in art criticism and history itself.

A LEARNING EXERCISE

Many interviews I conducted during my relatively recent career in the visual arts are decisive in my activities as a critic and curator, due to circumstances and diverse interests, among which the knowledge of the state of art, especially in Brazil,

7. Lawrence Alloway. Artists as writers, part One: Inside Information. *Artforum*, March 1974.

8. Elaine De Koening. So-and-so paints a Picture, *Art News*, from the late 1950s.

9. Rosalind Krauss. La photographie comme texte: le cas Namuth/Pollock. In: *Le photographique*. Paris: Macula, 1990.

10. Michael Fried. Art and objecthood. *Artforum*, 1967. Brazilian translation by Milton Machado In: *Arte e objetividade*. Revista *Arte&Ensaio*s, year IX, no. 9, 2002.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. See Patricia Bickers; Andrew Wilson (eds.) *Talking Art. Interviews with artists since 1976*. Manchester: Art Monthly/Riding house, 2007.

14. Iwona Blazwick. Anatomy of the interview. In: Op.cit.

15. Hans Ulrich Obrist. *Entrevista*. (several volumes). Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó Inhotim, 2009.

16. Pierre Cabanne. *Marcel Duchamp: Engenheiro do tempo perdido*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1987.

after many years of exile. Some of those interviews – such as those made with Amílcar de Castro, Thierry De Duve, Luciano Fabro, Lygia Pape as well as European curators interviewed for my PhD thesis on the work of artist Walter De Maria – were published on the 2011 book *Entrefalas*.¹⁷

In my first work as a curator, a re-assembly of the well-known *Salão Preto e Branco* (III Salão Nacional de Arte Moderna, 1954) at Funarte in 1986, my team and I gathered statements by about twenty artists and critics to understand the context and motives of political action – or the color strike – to protest against import taxes on paint and art materials. They include Sérgio Camargo, Ione Saldanha, Ubi Bava, Alcides da Rocha Miranda, Anna Letícia, Iberê Camargo, who provide curious and contradictory versions for the visual impact caused by the Salon. For instance, Aluísio Carvão – a member of the Frente Group at the time, says that “it was magnificent; it was even an experience, a challenge for people who might feel some aversion to black and white as an expression of color, as a plastic thing”.¹⁸

In addition to individual interviews, another large group of conversations took place in Paris between 1990 and 1991, as a look into the life and action of Lygia Clark in France, along with artists and critics who had contact with her. They include Rafael Soto, Cruz-Dias, Frank Popper and Pierre Restany. Part of that material was published in *Arte&Ensaio*s magazine in 1999.¹⁹

Among the many important conversations, it is worth highlighting the ten meetings with Nelson Felix in Rio de Janeiro and his studio in Friburgo between 1999 and 2005. We simply started talking with a view to understanding his work process and its aesthetic, ethical and spiritual contents, and recording them at my request and with certain reluctance by him. Throughout this period I was able to follow the artist’s comings and goings towards the conclusion of the *Grande Buddha* in Acre, around a mahogany tree and over a long time. The work started in 1985 as a project that is a milestone in non-museological work in Brazil. After a certain point, those

conversations began to gain tones of publication and after a long review process, *Trilogias. Conversas entre Nelson Felix e Glória Ferreira* [Trilogies. Conversations between Nelson Felix and Glória Ferreira]²⁰ was published.

These several references have undoubtedly encouraged my initiatives – again, specially as a learning process. Many of the interviews conducted remain unpublished for several reasons while many other have been published.

To conclude, I refer to the words of art critic Iwona Blazwick, mentioned above: “The word ‘interview’ describes a visual experience, not an aural experience – literally a mutual sight. It is an important genre of art history and art criticism because it incorporates the primary, the subjective and the contingent. It is based on exchanges and affirmations, and represents an evolving critical discourse”.

Gloria Ferreira: holds a PhD in Art History from Sorbonne University. She a Collaborating Professor at EBA/UFRJ and an art critic and independent curator. Her works as a curator include: Casa de Cultura Laura Alvim/2013 and 2014; *Arte como questão – Anos 70*, 2007; Luciano Fabro, 1997; Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, 1986. She edited several books, such as *Crítica de Arte no Brasil: Temáticas Contemporâneas*, Funarte, 2006; *Arte Contemporâneo Brasileiro: Documentos y Críticas/Contemporary Brazilian Art: Documents and Critical Texts*, Dado, 2009; and co-edited the collections *Clement Greenberg e o Debate Crítico*, Jorge Zahar Editor, 1997; *Escritos de Artistas 1960/1970*, Jorge Zahar Editor, 2006; and *Mário Pedrosa. Primary Documents*, MoMA, 2015. She published *Entrefalas*, Zouk, 2011 and *Glória Ferreira: Fotografias de uma amadora*, Nau Editora, 2016.

(*)This text was submitted in September 2017.

17. Glória Ferreira. *Entrefalas*. Porto Alegre: Editora Zouk, 2011.

18. Statement by Aluísio Carvão. In: catalogue of exhibition *Salão Preto e Branco. III Salão Nacional de Arte Moderna – 1954*. Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, Instituto Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1986.

19. Glória Ferreira. “Fazer de um dois multiplica o rir”. In: Revista *Arte&Ensaio*s, Year VI, no. 6, 1999.

20. *Trilogias, Conversas entre Nelson Felix e Glória Ferreira*. Rio de Janeiro: Pinakotheque/Linha, 2005.