

Johanna Burton and Lisa Pasquariello

“Ask Somebody Else Something Else”: Analyzing the Artist Interview

We conceived this selection of papers in part because we both rely frequently and heavily on the artist interview in our own work, which is primarily on post-war American artists. The phenomenon of the artist interview—not quite document, not quite literature, not quite propaganda, not quite staged voyeurism, not quite entertainment, not quite verifiable fact—has become increasingly compelling within the context of so-called modern and postmodern production and theorization. It seems to embody a kind of supplementary economy, at once extending the purview of the autonomous art object and simultaneously revealing that any such notion of autonomy is always already a fiction. In addition, the artist interview seems clearly designed to bring the figure of the artist into direct consideration when looking at or thinking through the implications—formal and historical—of any artwork, an impulse very much in tension with prevailing suspicions that warn against linking art with its makers' intentions or biographies.

The word “interview” stems from the French *entre vue*, to “see between,” and the complexities of seeing between spiral when one is attempting to do so not only with another person, but with a person who makes things meant to be seen. Perhaps a format that solicits words about images—images that are usually silent—is inherently fraught; indeed, examples abound of interview questions that would make most art historians cringe. During the trial of his libel suit against John Ruskin, James Whistler was asked, “Now, Mr. Whistler. Can you tell me how long it took you to knock off that nocturne?”¹ Or the radio interviewer, hounding away at a reticent Jackson Pollock: “Mr. Pollock, in your opinion, what is the meaning of modern art?”² Artist responses are often equally opaque. Recall an early Jasper Johns interview with Leo Steinberg. “Why did you cut them off just under the eyes?” Steinberg inquires about Johns’s *Target with Four Faces*. The answer: “They wouldn’t have fitted into the boxes if I’d left them whole.”³ A bit later, when Steinberg asks why the artist often uses the same typeface in his paintings, Johns, never the raconteur, responds, “That’s how the stencils come.” Lucas Samaras dramatized his own frustration with the format in a series of “auto-interviews,” in which he is his own interlocutor and repeatedly asks himself, “Why are you conducting this interview?” “What are you?” “What are you doing?” and even “How old are you?” The title of our panel, which now heads these introductory comments, comes from Andy Warhol’s response in a 1964 group interview with Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg. Bruce Glaser asks a question, and Warhol retorts, “Ask somebody else something else. I’m too high right now.”⁴ A few years later, Warhol was a bit less adversarial about his despair with these exchanges: “Interviews are like sitting in those Ford machines at the World’s Fair that toured around while someone spoke a commentary. I always feel that my words are coming from behind me, not from me. The interviewer should just tell me the words he wants me to say and I’ll repeat them after him.”⁵

But for all of the format’s knotty dynamics, artists continue to agree to be interviewed, and our fascination with these interviews abides, often to a fetish point. We know that the interview’s pretensions to eavesdropped intimacy and spontaneity are often feigned or created in after-the-fact editing; we know

The papers in this thematic investigation were first presented on February 21, 2004, at the Annual Conference of the College Art Association in Seattle. Johanna Burton and Lisa Pasquariello chaired the session, and Rhea Anastas was the discussant.

1. James McNeill Whistler, “On the Trial of Whistler v. Ruskin,” in *The World of Law: The Law as Literature*, ed. Ephraim London (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 152.

2. William Wright, interview with Jackson Pollock (1950), quoted in *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980*, ed. Ellen H. Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 5.

3. Leo Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: Seven Years of His Art,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 32.

4. Andy Warhol, quoted in Bruce Glaser, “Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol: A Discussion” (1964), in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 141.

5. Andy Warhol, quoted in Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1990), 111.

that artists and interviewers self-fashion and confabulate; but we also know about artists, as the novelist Julian Barnes put it about writers, that if you love someone, "if you depend upon the drip-feed of his intelligence, if you want to pursue him and find him—despite edicts to the contrary—then it's impossible to know too much."⁶ The ubiquity of the interview in other sociocultural arenas has not left the art world untouched, and the rise of the artist as celebrity can be and perhaps should be men-

tioned here. If the birth of Warhol's *Interview* magazine didn't make clear a quickly blurring logic among previously distinct kinds of cultural fame (and, indeed, cultural production), today's quote-ridden *New Yorker* articles detailing Vanessa Beecroft's eating disorders and John Currin's family life surely point to its logical consequences some thirty years later. But if persona has become increasingly and perhaps worryingly a part of the context of modern and contemporary art, this still doesn't give obvious answers as to what viewers (and readers) of that art are hoping to gain or to learn from reading a dialogic text staged between a curator, critic, museum director, or scholar and her case study of the moment. Still, editors of art magazines count published interviews among their most popular features; separate sections of exhibition catalogues and entire books are devoted to them; scholars regularly turn to them for the "last word" in making an argument or marshalling evidence about a particular artist or work. Certain responses to interview questions have proven central in theorizing the work of particular modern artists and even entire movements. (Think how many art historians have dined out on Frank Stella's "What you see is what you see," a response whose significance for Minimalism is seconded only by Tony Smith's exchange with an interviewer about his *Die* cube: "Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?" Smith is asked. "I was not making a monument." "Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?" "I was not making an object.")⁷

While we might not go so far as to attribute the allure of the artist interview to some subtle remanifestation of the intentional fallacy, this ongoing concern with the voice and intention of the artist is of especial relevance to those who work on postwar American art. What does the interview's implicit interest in authorial intent suggest about the success or failure of the project of Pop, Minimal, and post-Minimal work to suppress subjectivity, or of the Conceptual work of art's status as a transparent declaration? Or, to take the theoretical view, why an ongoing fascination with the interview when the author is allegedly dead and his voice silenced, when meaning has proliferated and is as contingent on contexts of reception as it is upon those of production? The question that haunts every paper here is, What is the value, or perhaps more relevantly, the seduction of the word of the artist? And what precisely is it that we as scholars, critics, and enthusiasts imagine we will gain by way of eavesdropping on the dialogue of others? (This dialogue, as we will see, takes many forms, from the highly choreographed and performative to the seemingly more intimate and off the cuff.)

While we would hardly want to suggest that the interview is aligned in any substantive way with psychoanalytic methods and the potential transmutation of talk into cure, a brief consideration of the interview—with its typically bipartite

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6. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 127.

7. Frank Stella, quoted in Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *ArtNews* 65, no. 5 (September 1966): 59; Tony Smith, quoted in Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966): 21.

structure and often opaque logic—by way of psychoanalysis can offer some telling clues. Indeed, for Freud's science to work, a kind of willing suspension of disbelief simply must occur, and the analysand, for one, has to create an unlikely fantasy around the person of the analyst. As Jacques Lacan so famously put it, the analyst becomes, for all intents and purposes, the subject supposed to know (*sujet supposé savoir*); that is, the illusion of mastery has to manifest itself (even if without base) in the person of the therapist before any movement forward might begin. One might argue that this logic, however, really appears to work in two directions. The analyst, knowing she doesn't really know, does know this: access to the patient's psyche resides precisely in that patient herself, and, therefore, it is not the analyst but analysand who is in closer (if more waylaid) proximity to an ever-illusive epistemological power. At risk of oversimplification, though, one might safely say that the fantasy of veracity, of mastery, and of knowledge circulates freely between two subjects, each of whom relies on rather incongruent, even illogically constructed, imaginings of the other.

As for the art object and its maker, the circulation of desire for meaning potentially includes so many more figures: critics argue for value based on historical lineage, political engagement, or formal genius, while institutions look to educate or enlighten a public in the ways of modern and contemporary art, often arguing for historical imbrications and ruptures simultaneously; artists themselves point to other artists, personal history, foundational texts, mass culture. There is, we might argue, an ever-expanding field of subjects supposed to know, all of whom point to one another in a kind of chaotic conferral of elusive, if phantasmically derived, knowledge and meaning. The artist interview gives a glimpse into this fascinating game of duck-duck-goose. Endlessly valuable for describing the phenomena of searches for unmoored meaning, the artist interview is equally suspect when it is assumed to provide stable evidence. For while it is profitable to mine such documents for provisional meaning, the meaning (or nonmeaning) of any artwork is hardly lodged in the syllables of its maker as artfully extracted by a keen interviewer. There is, however, much to be said for provisional meaning itself, as long as it is recognized as such.

A final comment and a self-reflexive one based on the predominance of male artists discussed in these papers. It became clear to us as we proceeded that where the artist interview is concerned there was a kind of historical, and even ongoing, discrepancy along the age-old gender line. Perhaps this has everything to do with the floating, unfulfilled desire for mastery we've touched on here. There are fewer interviews published with women artists (though the number of female interviewers is high), and while this can easily be explained by way of a still-male-heavy art world, perhaps there's something more literal going on, something that exposes an equation still in effect among the notion of mastery, the role of language in it, and the male figure's delivery of a parlance in accordance with it. Perhaps the most interesting artist interviews (of artists of either sex) disrupt this logic and, as all of our authors here have suggested, continue to fruitfully inform, even confuse, the work, but do so while vehemently and explicitly acknowledging that such speculations are, themselves, anything but the last word.

This selection of papers considers interviews with artists as various as Yvonne Rainer, Robert Ryman, and John Baldessari. The authors read between

interview lines, pay equal attention to what is and is not said, and demonstrate that communication can happen when it is least expected. They reveal the difficulties, even the impossibilities, of obtaining an outside position or an exterior vantage, show how the format can be a collectively productive exchange, and point out not only the opportunities realized by the interview but the possibilities foreclosed. Gwen Allen considers the interviews in *Avantgarde* magazine as part of the larger sociopolitical fabric of early 1970s SoHo. In proposing that these conversations were a response to a crisis in criticism after the bankruptcy of high-modernist formalism, she puts forward the interview as suggestive of a new model of the public sphere, an anticritical tool in sympathy with the documentary and dematerialized aims of the work of the artists interviewed. Suzanne Hudson also aligns the artist interview with the artist's work; she proposes that interviews with Robert Rauschenberg have assumed a compensatory exegetical function in apprehending work that is largely irreproducible—work that in its stubborn, present-tense foregrounding of materials and facture seems to resist criticism. In examining how the interview can be appropriated in the service of other claims, claims made in the name of the museum, or the retrospective, or painting, or even modernism, she too succeeds in resituating the format within a larger discursive field. Finally, Tim Griffin draws on personal experiences with several contemporary artists in a discussion of the interview through the lens of Method acting. The questions he poses about scripting and performance in the interview, about its peculiar intersections of persona, work, and history, ultimately stretch beyond the framework of the interview; they are larger questions about the production and reception of contemporary art. These questions and others suggested by the papers here are taken up in an in-depth response by Rhea Anastas, who served as the panel's discussant.

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