

## ORAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN ART

by Charles C. Hill

Oral history is an invaluable tool for art historians, even for those, such as myself, who are not professional interviewers nor involved in comprehensive oral history programmes. Having used tape recorded interviews in preparing research for an exhibition for the National Gallery of Canada, I have discovered certain assets and limitations of oral history as well as its many potentialities for the future.

In preparing my research for the exhibition Canadian Painting in the Thirties, shown in Ottawa in February 1975, I turned first to the usual art historical tools: general histories, biographies, exhibition catalogues and articles in newspapers and periodicals. I then consulted the traditional archival material available: letters, artists' notes and diaries and old exhibition files in different art institutions. In going through the material I found that two recent exhibitions had made extensive use of taped interviews, the 1969 Jock Macdonald retrospective organized by Ann Pollock and Dennis Reid and the Goodridge Roberts exhibition arranged by James Borcoman and Alfred Pinsky, both for the National Gallery of Canada. These people kindly allowed me to listen to their tapes and I soon realized what an important tool the taped interview could be.

By this time a general image of the decade had appeared; certain themes, artists' concerns, important works and artists had been identified. I made a preliminary choice of artists to be included in the exhibition and I contacted those still living and requested an appointment to visit them for an interview.

After the preliminary research, I prepared three different questionnaires for the three most important artistic centres in Canada at that time - Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. These questionnaires dealt with general issues such as changing themes in art, attitudes to past art and to foreign art, the effect of the depression and the development of artists' organizations. These were not sent only to artists but also to children of artists, friends of artists, art writers, students, spouses as well as lay people involved in art organizations. In all 26 people were interviewed on tape, of which 12 were artists to be included in the exhibition. An additional 33 people were interviewed but not taped, either because they refused to have the conversation recorded or I felt that there wasn't enough information to be obtained by taping them. The questionnaires were sent to the informants in advance of my visit. Thus I had done preliminary research, had informed the informants of my interests and set out to get specific information through preselected questions.

In the actual interview, I usually began with biographical information concerning the informant: how they saw themselves in the decade I was researching and their early history and from there went on to the questionnaire. This was not only important in obtaining information but also defined the viewpoint from which they saw the events of the thirties; with one important difference in that they were discussing the events some forty to thirty-five years later.

The interviews didn't always go smoothly. There were a few accidents such as the time I arrived at the home of André Biéler near Kingston to find I had

forgotten to bring a tape. Luckily Jeannette Biéler, his wife, had a small tape which, recorded at the lowest speed, was sufficient for the interview. Another time, I was in central Toronto interviewing Paraskeva Clark. The interview went well, I was excited by her and we went overtime; then I had to dash to the north of Toronto for another session. I arrived there to be told I had only an hour. I whipped out my tape recorder, put on the tape and the interview went moderately well. Taking off the tape I found I had recorded over my morning's interview.

For the type of research I was doing and for almost all art historical interviewing I do feel that the interviewer must know what information he or she wants to extract. It is important to learn as much as possible before interviewing, surveying the written record and especially the works of art identifying the gaps in one's knowledge. Oral history is only one document and should be used as a complement to other tools. Previous knowledge not only provides a necessary framework for the conversation but also allows you to occasionally give direction or information to the informant, thus facilitating the interview. However, being certain of a fact and by contradicting or challenging the informant, you may alienate that person and ruin the experience of the interview. The interviewer must respect the informant, questioning without hostilely challenging, entering the conversation and falling back and listening, at all times paying close attention so as to be alert for leads to further information. One error I did find myself committing was being too precise in what I wanted to get out of the interview. I was seeking specific information, the basic, structural, abstract grid of the decade - dates, connections and activities - and I often missed the more important general things being said which would give me a clearer insight into the spirit of the event or creative act.

Oral history does have certain assets independent of the capabilities of the interviewer. The first is spontaneity. The informant is answering questions off the top of his/her head (with the intermediary of a very general questionnaire in my case) and you get an insight into their emotional attitude to a situation which you often don't get in the written record. Something written and something said can have two different meanings. The oral interview also fills in the gaps, allowing you to read between the written lines. Connections or relationships are explained and you often get the real story behind situations which have been reported differently.

The interview is also important in providing insights into patterns of speech and thought, accent and class status. The tape preserved allows future generations to hear artists speak as real persons, as individuals. They become a more immediate presence adding another dimension to your awareness of their art. In this case the transcript becomes an imperfect record of the taped interview.

There are however limitations to this method. Some persons are inarticulate and especially so in front of a tape recorder. Others are inhibited or suspicious of your motives. The interviewer can also turn off or alienate the informant ruining the session. Often you must cope with faulty memories or lack of objectivity which is why it is necessary to use oral history in conjunction with other sources. The worst is the possibility of the person interviewed being dishonest and trying to impose a distorted vision on the interviewer.

Another problem, perhaps specific to art history is bringing together what the artist says about his or herself and their art, and what you actually see. This can create a friction for the viewer who wants to reconcile these statements with the visual objects at hand. The words and the art can say different things.

I do feel there is a necessity to develop a comprehensive oral history programme for Canadian art and with a few variations I would see this following the lead of the Archives of American Art in the United States. This institution was founded in 1954 and is now housed in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. They have developed an extensive oral history programme and as of 1971 possessed 1200 tapes. Transcriptions of these tapes are available through regional centres. These interviews include artists, art teachers, editors or art publications, art writers, art administrators and curators, art dealers and collectors and are designed to give a broad view of art in America.

In Canada I would see oral history falling into three categories loosely based on chronological divisions and I am confining myself here to non-native arts. The first is early Canadian and folk art where written records are at a minimum. Oral traditions in religious institutions about works of art should be recorded, how the nuns saw the paintings and sculpture, their role in the institution, stories about the donors or miracles connected with their history. In folk art or decorative arts weaving or sculptural traditions should be recorded, stories about the events depicted and the attitudes of the community to their work and to the artists. If certain works of art are part of celebrations or religious ceremonies, recordings of these events could be useful and informative. In this connection unwritten family history is also important in providing some information concerning ancestors involved in Canadian art.

The second category would be the recent past, interviewing people about their early history and present situation. This would be the method used in the preparation of Canadian Painting in the Thirties.

The third is contemporary art. The same interview classifications as for the second category would apply, artists, teachers, collectors, etc., for a broad documented view of cultural history. Happenings, multi-media events, performance art or musical events in connection with art exhibitions should be taped, possibly on video too. Artists should be interviewed about specific works, works in progress and their own or other art exhibitions. Panel discussions should be taped also.

The artist who has perhaps most exploited the potentialities of the taped interview is Greg Curnoe of London, Ontario, an artist who is extremely concerned to document and perceive his immediate regional environment through sound, written words and images. He has taped interviews with other artists concerning their lives, their art, the art market, their attitudes to creativity, the political situation of artists, etc. This documentation is of extreme importance especially as it is done by an artist with other artists.

Greg Curnoe has also used tapes in his art works, most recently in a large painting of a view out his studio window, View of Victoria Hospital, Second Series (February 10, 1969 - March 10, 1971) (Collection National Gallery of Canada) which was exhibited at the Venice Biennale this summer. The painting documents the actual view. Numbers painted on the work refer to a notebook which documents in chronological order what he was able to observe while sitting looking out the window at intervals over a period of two years. The tape, heard from two loud speakers at the top of the picture, was recorded at two points in time and consists of the sounds heard by him at the window - birds singing, cars going by, doors opening and shutting, voices speaking. The tape is an anonymous auditor of the environment. Thus Curnoe documents in one work the same scene at three levels of perception - a painting, a text and a sound-track. While this strays slightly from the topic of art history it is an

example of the increasing use of sound tapes by artists both to document their work and that of other artists, and in their own work.

Three recent catalogues have also used transcripts of taped interviews as the basis for their text. This is not a new thing as articles in Canadian periodicals have been written using interviews since the fifties. While Barry Lord was editor of Artscanada he even included recorded interviews and music on cheaply produced records with certain numbers of the magazine. The increasing use of question and answer interview transcripts in catalogues and magazines may be seen as a partial cop-out on the part of the writer but also does provide a sense of immediacy and authenticity to the catalogue. To a certain extent you are getting the word from the horse's mouth. I say to a certain extent because in all three cases there have been alterations.

The first is a catalogue from the Art Gallery of Ontario written by Roald Nasgaard for an exhibition of paintings by Ron Martin. The catalogue includes an essay by Roald Nasgaard and an interview with the artist by Nasgaard entitled "unfinished conversation" stressing the open-ended nature of the conversational experience. The text was heavily edited and restructured in conjunction with the artist. The exhibition centered around one series of paintings and the transcribed conversation discusses the series, their impetus, their meaning and their relation to other work.

A catalogue written by Chris Varley for a Roy Kiyooka exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery relates another experience. In this case the artist was given a transcription of the taped interview. While the curator wished to retain the qualities of the initial interview the artist wanted to tighten it up, rewrite parts and in the end even made the orthography and typography conform to his own personal style. Roy Kiyooka is also a poet and very concerned with the experience of language so that the changes in spelling and typesize were designed to express a reality beyond that of the interview. In the end the interview was entitled "Intersections from: the cassette tape interviews between Chris Varley and Roy Kiyooka edited at the intersection of conversation and writing by the artist".

The third example is a catalogue of the work of Stephen Cruise prepared for the Dalhousie Art Gallery. The catalogue includes reproductions of postcards sent by the artist, photographs of works and installations and reproductions of the actual typescript pages of the transcript of an interview with the artist by Philip Fry. Written at the top of the first page is a note from Philip Fry.

"Stephen, here's the edited transcript of the tape we made on January 18. I've tightened up the text and shifted the questions around..."

The artist has inked in annotations and comments in the text consisting of observations, thoughts, or perceptions aroused in his mind as he read the transcript, e.g.

"the speed at which things are remembered and their corners and the space and their order when the question is asked as they spill from a cavity as one opens one's mouth."

Despite Philip Fry's prefaced note this is the most faithful of the three to the original tape, including pauses, "ums", incomplete sentences and interruptions.

Again Stephen Cruise is an artist who works with words. His art works consist of objects placed in certain arrangements in an environment. The objects are often suggested by dreams and have a shamanistic quality, stones, feathers, sand, beaver pelts, arrows, a watch. The interview documents the process of creation of a specific installation for the Dalhousie exhibition, from dream to drawings to creation. The artist works with verbal notes and images and chooses objects which have verbal suggestions, e.g.,

"I chose 'snares' as I guess I felt comfortable with it by the fact that I had words to go with it, that made me feel close to it."

At another point he traces the development of verbal connections between snare and rabbit, hare's breadth and the hair's breath of the photographic experience.

These catalogues are only three examples of the use of oral history in the broad sense of the term history, as comprising the documentation of the present as well as the past. There are many other potential uses of taped interviews and many other problems which I haven't discussed such as copyright, transcription and preservation. Nor have I discussed methods of making these interviews accessible to the public, e.g. in catalogues, or in cheaply reproduced disc records. Nor have I discussed the potential use of tapes in conjunction with art exhibitions and lectures and on radio, nor the increasing use of video interviews for documentation. However, I do feel it is necessary to initiate a comprehensive oral history programme for Canadian art and these observations will, hopefully, be only a beginning in that direction.