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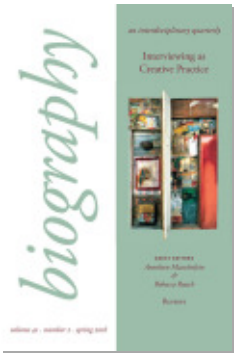
Putting Things Together: To Interviewing as Creative Practice

Anneleen Masschelein, Rebecca Roach



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PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER
INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEWING AS CREATIVE PRACTICE

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN AND REBECCA ROACH

Interviews are omnipresent in our globalized contemporary society. As media objects, they come to us through television, radio, and Twitter, and in magazines and newspapers. As a method, interviewing dominates police work, recruitment, therapy, social research, journalism, and oral history. So, too, it often forms the groundwork for biography. Personal interviews are a crucial site where individuals, whether politicians, writers, or research subjects, can be mined for information or legitimate their status, but evaluating the nature of the textual or audiovisual objects produced often opens up practical questions. Who, for example, had editorial control? What was the nature of the interview subject's involvement? What was the purpose and scope of the interview? While these debates have long been discussed in the social sciences, both at a methodological and conceptual level, in the context of cultural and literary studies such questions often position the interview as a problematic genre: what, for example, makes a literary interview "literary"? How can we distinguish between adjacent—more serious—denominations like the conversation and the dialogue, or how can we distinguish between literary interview and author interview? Is it the interview's subject, style, content, or interviewer? How should we read an interview? Is it comparable with a letter, a memoir, an essay, or a report? What is the relationship between an interview and a literary or scholarly oeuvre, or a single interview and a series? Situated midway between contemporary events and a view to the documentary "afterlife," what is the interview's temporal status? Is it a method, genre, or object?

Highlighting difficult questions around the status of authorship, collaborative practice, reading strategies, aesthetic production, and the function of institutions, networks, and disciplinary boundaries, examining interviews compels us to face issues that are central to contemporary research and have only become more urgent in the digital moment. We see this special issue as

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a complement to the extensive material on interviewing in sociology, oral history, and psychology, and as working within this wider framework to call for rigorous attention to the interview by scholars of literature, culture, and criticism. Combining scholarly articles with practitioners' reflections, the aim of our thematic issue is to focus on the interview as method and object and, in doing so, to throw light on these and other questions.

That is how we framed our initial proposal to *Biography* back in 2015. Much of it we still agree with; in places we would shift the emphasis. During a two-day meeting that we held in London to discuss the contributions, it dawned on us that, rather than genre, our contributions revolve around "practice." The interest in interviewers evinced by the majority of our contributors highlights both the activity of interviewing and the degree to which such activity is deeply engaged with the relationship between practical, aesthetic, and ethical considerations. Thus, this special issue takes stock of the variety of practices that have marked the interview throughout the twentieth century in order to trace some shifts in the interview's engagement with subjectivity and collectivity; the public and the private; theory, criticism, and art or creative writing; power and friendship.

The idea of such a collection emerged from our work on interviews in the literary field, research that was conducted simultaneously yet independently. Rebecca Roach is the author of *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*, the first monograph to trace a history of the interview and interviewing in Anglophone literature, which Oxford University Press is publishing this year. The book argues that the interview form has been a key means of constituting publics, subjects, and authorship in modernity. Furthermore, it notes that print interviewing is an inscription technology. As the human embodiment of this technology, the interviewer is often the site of wider cultural anxieties around objectivity, mediation, and impersonality in a machine age.

Anneleen Masschelein's engagement with interviews originates in various interests. Her previous research on the idea of "the uncanny" found that this notion is an "unconcept." This neologism indicates that in this particular case, an aesthetic term paradoxically becomes fashionable and canonized as a concept in contemporary aesthetic theory, because its conceptual ambiguity is emblematic for the era associated with the rise of what is commonly called "theory," the last decades of the twentieth century. Interviews, in her view, are similar hybrid cultural phenomena. Hard to classify because of their diversity, transience, and also shiftiness, they have nonetheless become more and more prominent in the arts at the end of the twentieth century, and this prominence has made them subject to canonizing and disciplinary moves.

Masschelein's work on the "last interview" in this issue ties in with her research on the uncanniness of temporality and images, and on dying in contemporary culture. She first pointed at the specificity of the last interview in a comparative review article on the history and poetics of the literary interview, written in collaboration with her Belgian colleagues David Martens, Christophe Meurée, and Stephanie Vanasten. Published in 2014 in *Poetics Today*, this publication, supplemented with a hefty annotated bibliography, aimed to bring together the dispersed research on the literary interview in English, French, and German and to make these materials accessible to researchers. At the same time, the review article was a manifesto for the further study of the literary interview as a hybrid genre. That challenge has been taken up by many scholars working on the interview; it is worth mentioning some of the results that have appeared since 2014 here.

Martens and Meurée have continued to variously examine "the conditional literarity" of the interview, literary interviews on radio and television, and writers' experience of interviews—both via fictional representations of interviews (a notable phenomenon in French literature, as Galia Yanoshevsky argues in this issue) and via interviews on interviewing ("Ceci n'est"; "L'intervieweur"; and *Secrets*). One of the most prolific researchers on the literary interview over the years has been Galia Yanoshevsky. In a response to the 2014 review article, she defended the "literariness" of the author interview ("On the Literariness"). In a special issue of *Argumentation and Discourse Analysis* that she edited, she had already argued convincingly that the literary interview was a perfect test case for the method of discourse analysis ("L'entretien littéraire"). Her monograph on the literary interview as a genre, *L'entretien littéraire: Anatomie d'un genre*, will appear this year with Classiques Garnier. Much research in the French tradition focuses on questions of genre or subgenres of the literary interview. Odile Cornuz, for instance, examines the interview book as a literary gesture (*D'une pratique*). Taking into account the historical development of the literary interview book and its interaction with different media, her book offers a model for understanding the literary interview as a genre.

Comparatively, in the Anglophone literary sphere, research has been slower to emerge—even as interviews dominate literary and critical magazines. Sarah Fay's dissertation on the interview in the American literary tradition before 1956 ("The American Tradition") and Roach's thesis on the transatlantic origins of the interview between 1850 and 2010 ("Transatlantic Conversations") are both noteworthy additions to the scholarship identified in the 2014 *Poetics Today* bibliography. Jerome Boyd Maunsell has argued for the autobiographical function of writers' and artists' interviews, and articles and chapters on avant-garde creative experimentation with interviews in the

1950s and 1960s and on the figure of the interviewer in interwar British women's magazines have appeared (Roach, "'Endless Talk'"; "The Lady Interviewer").

In recent years interest in the artist interview has also been rising, although there is remarkably little cross-fertilization between theoretical work in literary studies and art history. Two edited French volumes on the artist interview examine the artist interview from an international but not overly systematic perspective. Jérôme Dupeyrat and Mathieu Harel-Vivier map the artist interview through cases of interviews with filmmakers and visual artists, including an interview with star interviewer and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist.[1] Laurence Brogniez and Valérie Dufour trace the development of the artist interview, with special attention to interviews (including imaginary ones) with composers. In this issue, James Finch's article on the art critic and interviewer David Sylvester also provides a useful summary of the history of the artist interview in the Anglophone tradition.

While the interview is increasingly being recognized and canonized in the literary and artistic field, in the social sciences the interview as research method has been facing strong competition. Since 2014, Roach has been examining the contemporary status of interviews and interviewing from an interdisciplinary perspective as part of the European Research Council's "Ego Media" project, which examines the impact of contemporary new media on forms and practices of self-representation. As she points out in her monograph, with the advent of Big Data and Web 2.0, the longstanding association between interviewing and data collection is beginning to break down. Today's social media platforms generate digital traces of our social, economic, political, and cultural practices that can be mined and analyzed, and in doing so fundamentally transform the methods of the social sciences. As far back as 2007, sociologists Mike Savage and Roger Burrows were arguing that "both the sample survey and the in-depth interview are increasingly dated research methods, which are unlikely to provide a robust base for the jurisdiction of empirical sociologists in coming decades" (885). This discussion has become only more vociferous in subsequent years, with numerous interventions by Savage, Burrows, and their colleagues, and by initiatives such as the Collaborative Online Social Media ObServatory (COSMOS) project.[2] While this methodological skirmish in sociology might not seem to have an immediate relevance to those working in literary studies (broadly conceived), the decoupling of interviewing and instrumentalism suggests that interviews might accrete new paradigms. No longer primarily a method of data collection, interviews in the social sciences might well be conceived as a life writing practice.

Obviously, the interview has been used as a tool by biographers, ethnographers, oral historians, and documentary makers for a long time, as Hermione Lee and Mike Dibb attest in this issue. The collaborative aspect of interviews affects not just authorial attributions and the shaping of subjectivity in this technology of the self; it can support interpersonal production, including collaborative writing and biography. This recognition results in an interesting double move. While literary studies and art history have been discovering interviews as a genre with ties to autobiography, fiction, and criticism, in the social sciences there has been a tendency to experiment with literary or creative forms to reflect on the method of the interview (Richardson; Denzin; Wyatt et al.). Such reflection can include the point of view of the interviewee, the apparent subject of the interview, but it can also include the viewpoint of the interviewer, who uses the interview to shape her own subjectivity as researcher—or to disappear, as Sylvère Lotringer put it in his 1986 self-interview in this issue. Finally, it can lead to a collective, impersonal viewpoint that exceeds subjectivity, turning the interview into an assemblage of "voice[s] without organs" (Mazzei 732) that results in a living body of thinking.

This dimension of the interview is captured by artist Robert Rauschenberg's 1955 combine *Interview* featured on the cover of this issue. Here, found objects—drawings, photographs, letters, envelopes, newspapers, and a baseball—are collaged together around a door that may perhaps lead inward, to the artist, outward, to the world and society, or to nowhere in particular. While the description of the artwork on the website of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles offers various directions of interpretation, none of these includes the import of the title:

> Art historians continue to debate whether a Combine like *Interview* alludes to urban redevelopment in downtown New York, as signaled by the brick and cast-off door, or to art's classical past, as indicated by the reproduction of a painting of Galatea, a mythological subject, in the center, or whether it is purposefully incoherent, offering nonsense accumulations that thwart interpretation. (MOCA)

Instead of nonsense accumulations, we consider the interview as an encounter, as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements. It promises access to an interior but ultimately remains unruly: resisting interpretative truth, it reveals things other than what it may promise. Thus, in this special issue as it now stands, our interest has shifted from questions of genre to the notion of the interview as an "unconcept": ambiguous, paradoxical, the interview belongs everywhere and nowhere.

Although an apparently straightforward and accessible tool, interviewing is nonetheless tricky. Attempts to incorporate it in a specific field or discipline, or to use it for specific purposes, raise theoretical and methodological problems that cannot be easily solved. The question of how best to read an interview—whether for pleasure or as a scholarly object—also turns out to be more difficult than the disposable or strictly formatted reputation of the press interview suggests. At the same time, this conundrum is also where the interview's possibility for creativity and continual transformation lies.

First and foremost, then, it is to practice that we turn, emphasizing how interviews have been and are used in creative ways, and how they in turn contribute to new forms and ways of being. We do this by focusing on the craft of interviewing. This special issue draws on a variety of perspectives and formats. Given the focus on interviewing as creative practice, we wanted to examine the interview through concrete cases of individuals who had dedicated themselves to such activity. In addition to articles, this issue is therefore comprised of interviews conducted face-to-face and by email and a self-interview. They speak, we hope, to the variety of motivations, pathways, and foci evinced by practitioners of interviewing. In some cases, the transcripts have been heavily rewritten; in other cases they have been edited with a light hand. By indicating these editing decisions, we also draw attention to the need for a protocol that describes the practice of transcribing and editing interviews, so that such activities can be accounted for when analyzing these texts in a scholarly setting.[3]

We open our special issue with James Finch's discussion of the interviewing practice of British art critic David Sylvester. An example of interviewing deployed for critical ends, Sylvester's interviews translate ideas between expert and lay audiences and across media. For Finch, Sylvester conceived of interviewing as producing material, which he could then shape for curatorial purposes. Gesturing to the wider use of artist interviews within the art world, Finch indicates the degree to which interviewing has become a key means by which artists' projects are assigned a textual frame.

Sylvère Lotringer's self-interview contemplates his role as interviewer for the legendary journal and publisher *Semiotext(e)*, which introduced French theory to the New York art world of the 1980s. For Lotringer, the interview is not just a tool to make the ideas of "foreign agents" known in a more accessible form; it is a form of thinking in itself that is especially appropriate for artists and activists. The piece included here is in fact a transcript of a 1986 performance in which Lotringer staged the different roles of interviewer and interviewee to highlight the power of the interview, as well as its inherent provisionality. He likens the practice of interviewing to an act of disappearing, and the act as akin to "pitching your tent for the night."

Jeffrey J. Williams's project of interviewing literary theorists offers an interesting counterpoint to Lotringer's performance. Less concerned with questions of aesthetics or activism, Williams's aim is to gather an archive of interviews that reveals a history of American criticism in the making. Thus, he hopes to provide an important supplement to disciplinary histories of English studies. Attesting to the nature of academic labor and institutions, Williams also focuses on the craft of the critical interview itself.

Having reflected on the critical potential and structural role of interviewing, we turn then to consider the pedagogical function via an interview with Australian scholar Bronwyn Davies. Her interview here traces her career-long interest in the relationship between personal stories, innovative methods, embodied practice, and theoretical discourse. Well known for her work on collective biography, on coproduction in the work of theorists such as Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze, and the relationship between gender and subjectivity in children, Davies engages with different forms of conversation across her research. Her editing practices often develop new forms of collaborative writing and methods that have become increasingly common in qualitative research, but which may also be adopted by researchers in the arts.

Meanwhile, the interview with biographer, scholar, and broadcast interviewer Hermione Lee foregrounds the wider confluence between interviewing practice and literary culture in Britain. The conversation spans discussion of the practice as it relates to biographical writing and as a tool of the book-publishing and media industries. In doing so it presents the perspective of the biographer. Less explicitly, it also relates to Davies's contribution by attesting to the pedagogical role of interviewing. Recalling the "apprentice meets grand master" model, here the dialogue between professor and student has been subtly transformed by both gender and Lee's willingness to share (and even surrender) her claims to expertise as she reflects on the value of experience.

A less charitable model of interviewing sits at the heart of Yanoshevsky's article. The particular group of contemporary French novels that she discusses features interview interactions characterized by their antagonism. These authors depict such situations in their fiction as a means of revenging themselves on the perceived cultural power of the interviewer. Writing out of a long tradition that pits journalist against novelist, these authors draw upon the trope of interviewing as a source for their own creative practice.

One of Yanoshevsky's case studies is the 2014 novel *Buvard*, written by the young French writer Julia Kerninon. In her interview in this issue, Kerninon discusses her own wide-ranging engagement with the interview. The author of a novel structured as an author interview and the subject of numerous press interviews, Kerninon has also received a doctorate for a thesis on perhaps the

best-known series of author interviews: those published in the *Paris Review*. Discussing the peculiar notion of the interviewing process championed by long-time editor George Plimpton and the prestige of the series as a whole, Kerninon assesses the influence of her research on her own writing and media persona.

Julie Cyzewski's article marks a turn to consider the broader political work that interviews can do. Focusing on the radio interviews of Indian writers Mulk Raj Anand and Attia Hosain broadcast by the BBC's Eastern Service between 1948 and 1960, Cyzewski argues that these broadcasts operated as a form of soft power as Britain sought to establish new relations with its former colonies. Highlighting the reliance these interviews place on a rhetoric of friendship and hospitality, Cyzewski offers one particular mode of the interviewer-interviewee relationship while illustrating that the tone, style, and affect of an interview can have significant and divergent ethical implications.

Mike Dibb also discusses broadcast interviews, speaking here about his documentary work and his long interviews for television. He shows how conversation and collage of people, images, music, and ideas constitute the heart of his oeuvre. Although working in one of the most heavily formatted environments—television—Dibb manages to stretch the interview form to its limits and demonstrates how exciting it can be to watch conversations between two people unfold.

Finally, Masschelein's article discusses the particular phenomenon of the author's "last interview" at the end of the twentieth century. Masschelein examines last interviews with French philosopher Jacques Derrida and British playwright and screenwriter Dennis Potter against the backdrop of a broader shift in cultural conceptions of dying. She theorizes interviewing's creative practice in terms of the cultural work it performs: the last interview's imbrication in the operations of fame, celebrity, and posterity in processes of mediatization and in the establishment of "death styles."

Collectively, these contributions aim to provide something of a "combine" on our topic. Putting things together, it suggests new avenues for thinking about interviewing.

NOTES

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1. Obrist also reflects on his practice in *Das Interview: Formen und Foren des Künstlergesprächs*, edited by Michael Diers, Lars Blunck, and Hans Ulrich Obrist.
2. This methodological debate can be traced across work by Beer and Burrows; Burrows and Savage, "Some" and "After"; Ruppert, Law, and Savage; Housley et al.
3. Kasia Boddy makes this case strongly in her 1998 article (66).

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