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Conference theme:	Oral History and the Visual Image
Title:	'A Blurred Photograph of Jesus is better than no photograph at all': the practicalities of using video as an oral history tool.
Equipment:	I will be bringing a DVD disc with video clips on it. I will therefore need either a laptop which can play DVDs or a DVD player (attached to a data projector).

'A Blurred Photograph of Jesus is better than no photograph at all': the practicalities of using video as an oral history tool.

Sub-theme: Oral History and the Visual Image.

ABSTRACT:

This paper deals with the use of video as an oral history tool and the importance of the visual image in understanding visual artists and their work. Oral history grew out of improvements in technology in the mid-twentieth century which allowed us to record on audio tape what people said. Whilst audio comes from the Latin 'audire' – to hear, video comes from the Latin 'videre' – to see. In fact video allows us to see and hear and this paper will argue the case for oral historians to engage more fully with video. In our multi-media, *YouTube* world many people now have access to a video camera and a significant number have computer software that allows them to edit – video is becoming second nature. This paper will use examples from video recorded interviews in the National Electronic and Video Archive of the Crafts to show the extent to which the visual element of the interview is crucial in fully understanding visual artists. The paper will also demonstrate the ways in which video can be misused and the pitfalls of favouring one recording methodology at the expense of others. In highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of video the author will seek to show the ways in which video, if used sensitively and judiciously can be used to greatly enhance the field of oral history and the visual arts.

I am responsible for an archive at the University of the West of England, Bristol in the United Kingdom. Known as the National Electronic and Video Archive of the Crafts, or NEVAC for short - it contains video and audio recordings of British craftspeople. The man who started NEVAC was Mike Hughes (1942-2000). One of the pieces of advice he dispensed to people who wanted to use video but could not afford the broadcast quality equipment we use was that, 'a blurred photograph of Jesus is better than no photograph at all'. This may seem odd advice to pass on from someone delivering a paper on the benefits of the visual in oral history but what he was getting at was that it was better to make any recording (however flawed) than none at all. However, what is more important is the hidden reality that the crucial part of a video is the sound. If a television picture is fuzzy or blurred the viewer can get used to it but if the sound is indistinct then the listener gives up and cannot get used to it. Whilst I will be discussing the advantages of video I want to make the point that video is audio-visual, not just visual.

The irony of this conference is that the papers being delivered are most likely to live on afterwards as the published textual proceedings. The video clips I will show you will therefore only be available via their transcripts. In the same way that a transcript is a partial representation of the spoken word an audio recording is also a partial representation. Whilst I would not claim that video can be a complete rendering of the spoken word I would argue that it is more complete. Writing on the problems of relying upon text to represent a visual form of communication, Richard Cándida Smith argued that 'The gesture itself lies beyond words…without the presence of gesture, words stand devoid of context….Meaning does not lie in the text per se but in the relationship for which the text is one of many signs' (Cándida-Smith, 2003). This paper deals with the use of video as an oral history tool (not the only one) and the importance of the visual in understanding language. Whilst Cándida-Smith has written persuasively about the importance of gesture, in this paper I want to do something much simpler but in some respects just as crucial. I want to discuss ways in which if we are going to use video we should do so thoughtfully and with an awareness of the medium's strengths and weaknesses.

At NEVAC we conduct two types of interview which I will outline briefly:

- The first is the 'archive' video interviews where little dispensation is made for later editing, (if mistakes are made or a telephone rings we simply carry on). The footage goes in to the archive uncut. These are usually the longest recordings in the archive, lasting from between two and seven hours in total and they are the closest thing to a traditional oral history interview that NEVAC produces. Whilst NEVAC began as a 'life story' archive that happened to concentrate on video rather than audio it was standard practice from the beginning to play to video's strengths and include footage of the artists discussing a piece of their work and where possible demonstrating a making process. (http://www.media.uwe.ac.uk/nevac/report/home.htm)

- The second type is the commissioned video interview. These are interviews with craftspeople commissioned by museums and galleries for exhibitions to play in the gallery on a TV or computer screen. These are usually between 10 and 30 minutes long and have been edited down from between 2 to 5 hours of original footage. These interviews will often include subtitles as well as credits. We always retain copyright on the unedited footage which we keep in the archive. The client owns the copyright on the edited version. The following clip of Elaine Sheldon and Dominic Cooney was made for 'Craftspace Touring' to accompany an exhibition featuring artists working in the English Midlands. The brief was to make a video that combined talking and making.

  Elaine: 'The idea is that the flex should look as if it supports the light shade and the bulb and that was the concept and the idea to use glass really came from chandelier repairs. Early electric chandeliers had hollow tubes like this to house the flex and we thought it was really interesting to make a really eccentric version. [The rest of the video cuts in shots of the glass being heated and made in to the finished light fitting].
  Dominic: It was kind of led by the making process of actually drawing out a hollow tube of hot glass and then we thought we'd try to push the limits of what we could do with it.

Elaine: Traditional chandeliers are usually made out of S's that are bent on a board around nails so it was the idea that this should be eccentric and free-formed.
Dominic: We take a gather of glass and blow it in to a heavy but hollow tube and then we start drawing it out erm and take one end each, pull it out quite long while it's still hot but not so hot that it's going to collapse and just go on the floor. You get the gloves on, the Kevlar gloves, so that they're heat proof and then physically start looping it on a fire proof board and then loop it in to shape that looks like it will be self supporting and at the same time interesting.
Elaine: We generally aim for three points as a base.
Dominic: Yeah, like a milking stool so you know it's going, going to stand up. Obviously doing it on a board you can tell as well and then kind of try and bring the top up. We do sort of two styles, don't we – one that's more vertical like this one and then one that's more horizontal and then we have to detach it from the iron and then put it in to the annealing oven to cool down slowly overnight.
Elaine: The ends are then finished and ground and these brass caps applied. Then it's wired up and assembled. The shade is then blown glass, which is cut locally, cut and polished. We called it 'Unruly Limb' because we liked this idea that it sort of crawled off a chandelier or broken off a chandelier'.

We use the profits from commissioned videos such as this to conduct archive video interviews for which we have not secured funding.

The Criticisms of video:

In order to discuss video as an oral history tool I will first address some of its 'pros and cons'. The main criticisms of video are that it is expensive, time-consuming, intrusive and contrived:

- The issue of the relative expense of video compared to audio is to do with the final quality of the recording. If using a mini-DV recorder and a lapel mic on a fixed tripod then the costs apart from the initial outlay for equipment are minimal. If using lights and more sophisticated equipment then costs are likely to be higher. If like us you use a lighting cameraman and soundman

then crew costs are likely to be around £750 per day (15,500 MXN) if done on commercial rates. We also do something that others in the field rarely do – we pay the interviewees for their time. If we are asking a craftsperson to take a day out of their usual schedule then the least we can do is recompense them for their time. Our standard daily rate is £150 (3,100 MXN). We therefore rely on securing external funding to undertake the majority of our interviews.

- There is no getting away from the fact that video interviews are almost always more time-consuming than audio. For each day's filming we do on video we are unlikely to produce more than 2-4 hours of tape. It takes time to choose the place to film, set up equipment and after 30 minutes or an hour the tape needs to be changed. If a different setting is then needed (such as a workshop or studio), then more time is taken to set up again. If using a very basic filming set up then a camera can be left filming on a tripod until each tape finishes so time spent setting up can be kept to a minimum.

- Video has been accused of being a more intrusive medium than audio as more people are often involved and this can put off the interviewee. For instance the Oral History Society's website states that 'oral historians have mixed views about the impact of a video camera on the intimacy of the interview relationship'. I would say that in my experience the camera is soon forgotten by the interviewee. Any interview is affected by the context and the people involved and to assume that a one-on-one interview is more pure is an over simplification.

- A final issue is to do with expectations and the often contrived nature of video recording. If you are spending not inconsiderable amounts of money on a video interview then there is a tendency to think carefully about how the footage might be used in the future. For instance someone might want to edit the footage. If this is a consideration then the interview might be approached differently and sections may need to be re-shot in order to ensure the visuals go with the audio. With a sound interview if editing needs to be done at a later

date then special dispensation for this does not need to be made when the interview takes place. The addition of moving images to the audio means that in order to ensure the video footage is as useful as possible for any later needs, an experienced camera person or Director is needed. For instance if an item is discussed that isn't in shot then it is vital that it is filmed once the interview has taken place so that there is footage of it.

The Benefits of video:

In a brief sentence outlining the benefits of video, the Oral History Society's website concedes that 'video has its benefits (apart from the interview itself, photographs can also be filmed for later use)' and then goes on to state that 'done badly it is perhaps best not done at all'. I would agree that badly done video is usually worse than badly done audio but the idea that the one benefit of video worth noting is that 'photographs' can be 'filmed for later use' shows a lack of engagement with the medium and is at the very least a reductive approach. The main benefits of video in my experience relate to the visual aspects of the medium and its consequent ability to engage and entertain and neither should be underestimated.

- At the risk of stating the obvious, unless high quality images are taken alongside an audio recording the audio is simply sound and any visual clues in the interview are lost. Video allows the viewer to see what the interviewee is wearing, what environment they are in, what they look like, their gestures and what facial clues they are giving when saying certain things. However, somewhat paradoxically the visual can also be a downside of video. One of the benefits of an audio recording is that if it is published as a transcript rather than a recording it will still make sense, often because it was conducted in the knowledge that it was going to be transcribed and published as a text. However, if a video recording is produced well and makes the best possible use of the visual elements which are its strength, then the transcription of it often makes very little sense as there are significant parts where someone is making or describing something when very little is said. The issue then becomes how do we make video accessible if it does not make sense as a text?

- It is sometimes forgotten that if oral history interviews are going to be widely used then they need to be accessible, both literally and intellectually. Video is on the whole a more accessible medium because people are so used to watching television and movies. Museum curators never come to me and say can you do an audio interview with a particular artist? They always ask for a video interview because they know it will engage their visitors. With broadband access in the UK my students now spend large amounts of time watching video on the Internet – often via YouTube or the BBC. Some universities are even offering some of their lectures via YouTube or their own Intranet. Video is no longer a medium that needs expensive equipment and professional expertise to make it accessible – a twelve year old can do it at home on a basic Personal Computer. If we want oral history archives to be used then we need to look at online video as one way of delivering it.

Video interviewing and the Crafts

The key to the issues discussed so far is context. As a research tool being used to glean information and 'data' then audio is potentially more useful. For instance in the excellent Autumn 1990 special edition of the *Oral History* Journal on 'the crafts', the articles use oral history as a data gathering tool, presumably recorded originally with the knowledge that it was most likely to be presented as text (Oral History Society, 1990, Vol.18, no.2). Whilst images are used alongside the text the images are rarely if at all referred to in the text – they are essentially visual relief from the text. When conducting interviews with visual artists the opportunity to talk about things that they've made or has inspired them often brings up unexpected discussions which were not forthcoming when just talking one to one. In analysing the construction of meaning in art, Cándida-Smith argues that,

> 'In constructive activities, such as art, meaning is to be experienced sensually. Objects reveal forms of expression that bid their users to see, touch, feel, and exist in space in specific and replicable ways. When objects are valued, they transform the sensory habits of the body. Words provide one set of signs for these transformations' (Cándida-Smith, 2003).

In traditional audio interviews the opportunity to discuss objects is sometimes avoided because talking about something the listener cannot see is problematic, for obvious reasons. The media therefore dictates the type of interview and can disregard or minimise the importance of what makes the visual artist distinctive and meaningful. There are plenty of cases where video interviews are conducted where the benefit of recording on video is not immediately obvious. This usually results from a feeling that video is a superior medium. Video is a useful medium when used for the right reasons but if all one is going to do is train a video camera on an interviewee then the question should be asked, 'why?' Video should be used thoughtfully and in a way that maximises its visual elements. Whilst audio comes from the Latin 'audire' – to hear, video comes from 'videre' – to see, but video allows us to see and hear – they are inextricably linked. Audio on its own encourages the listener to use their imagination to visualise what a person looks like, where they are sitting and the different events they are recounting. Video removes a substantial amount of this guesswork, sometimes to the benefit of the finished interview and sometimes not. I will show you two short examples which demonstrate how the visual aspects of video can be utilised.

The following clip is taken from an interview conducted with textile artist Rozanne Hawklsey at her studio in Wales in February 2004. The interview lasted 2 hours and 45 minutes and was an example of an archive video interview – we did not film with the intention of editing afterwards. This clip is just 2 minutes and 13 seconds. Rozanne is showing her sketch book and discussing her interest in self-portraiture.

> Rozanne: 'Can you see that, a little child?
> Margaret: Yes.
> Rozanne: That's just something I do. Myself.
> Margaret: Do you know what triggers these, do you know, can you identify anything or does it just, do you just start, how do you go about actually?
> Rozanne: It really, it sounds pretentious, it really is a feeling under the ribs. It's that, certainly when I did a whole lot of Brian's after his death that nobody's seen erm, they're almost like caricatures, they're quite unlike the

ones I did when Matthew died. I just felt a need – I had to and the only way I knew apart form screaming maybe was to draw them erm, well I probably was screaming at the same time, some of them. I'll just find, there's a whole lot of my face. I should think when I die I've got hundreds of my face in various stages of dropping down, because it's there and I know I'm not going to cheat on it, I'm not looking to make myself look good. I know where the eye socket is, I know where I think the cheek bones should be if they showed'.

The camera operator knew the viewer would have been watching Rozanne during other parts of the interview and that the crucial element to capture at this stage was the sketches about which she was talking. Whilst he does eventually pan out to show Rozanne's face he concentrates on what she is talking about. In the same way that a question by the interviewer may elicit a very personal response, so the request to talk about her sketchbook brought heartfelt and emotional issues to the fore.

When myself and Linda Sandino (a friend and colleague from Camberwell College in London), discussed working on a project together we decided to concentrate on video because Linda had not done a video interview before and we wanted to compare what the different recording media had to offer. NEVAC funded a two day interview with the weaver Peter Collingwood - someone Linda had previously interviewed on audio for the National Life Story Collection's Artists' Lives project at the British Library. Linda's audio interview lasted thirteen hours (conducted over a number of weeks) and followed the tried and tested oral history approach of the National Life Story Collection. We agreed that given that we might get six hours filming over two days that we should concentrate on the areas that were not possible to record on audio – making processes and examples of Peter's own textiles and those from his ethnographic collection. In the following clip Peter is discussing a camel strap made in Rajasthan in the mid-twentieth century and which forms a part of his large textile collection.

Peter: 'Well I think as this one shows, there's quite a range of geometric things you can do and also on some of these you get representations of horses and

> animals and camels and people but they're all related to camels, either they're sort of cinches to hold the saddles on – they go under the camel's body and up to the saddle on either side or like this one – it's just purely decoration that hangs down with those big bobbles either side. As the camel walks they just sort of swing on either side. And this is really a very special one because the design changes so much'.

You can see as Peter holds up the strap to the camera at the end that the presence of the camera is essentially an extra set of eyes in the room – it affects the interview in a way that is difficult to avoid and for some oral historians would be a valid enough reason to avoid the medium. I can imagine some in the audience questioning whether what I do is in fact oral history but I am not suggesting that what I do can easily be compared to a thirteen hour audio interview in the National Life Story Collection – I am in fact demonstrating that they are poles apart. My point is that they are different media and those differences have to be understood and their strengths played to. It is not a case of 'either' 'or' but of using the best medium for the job at hand.

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