

A HERMENEUTICS OF EMPATHY

The artist interview in South Africa

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CONTENTS

Introduction	2
I <i>A form unto itself</i>	7
II <i>An unusual thing</i>	17
III <i>A revelation</i>	27
IV <i>But anyway...</i>	36
V <i>A trumpery, a fiction</i>	45
Conclusion	50
Endnotes	52
Bibliography	53
Appendix	59

INTRODUCTION

An anthology of interviews would be a valuable and arguably urgent contribution to the writing of art history in our part of the world. No satisfactory introduction to the South African visual arts landscape exists at the moment. Books that fulfilled that role just a few years ago have dated quickly, due to the rapidly changing terrain. The cover of Sue Williamson's *South African Art Now* from 2009, for example, features a painting by Mustafa Maluka (and not just any painting, but one of the best he ever painted, a work included in the group exhibition *Flow* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2008). Since the publication of Williamson's book, Maluka has withdrawn from the South African scene, and has all but stopped exhibiting internationally. This is indicative of the continuously shifting parameters of a living and rapidly changing art world. Every book before and every book after will face the same fate. There are good reasons art history as a discipline has long resisted writing on living artists (Hudson 2008).

However, because curators from elsewhere in the world are continuously 'discovering' South African art, good introductory texts remain essential. Imagining what a new introductory volume might look like, I wondered about the possibility of an anthology of artist interviews. After all, one of the most important texts of South African art criticism is the interview that Hans Ulrich Obrist conducted with Ernest Mancoba, not long before the latter's death. It speaks to the lasting power of an excellent interview, a power that transcends the mere recording of information. In addition, the Mancoba text is relevant beyond the study of Mancoba's own work, suggesting that other interviews may have broader implications too. And last, there are reasons to believe that the interview format is particularly well suited to our current needs.

I am an avid consumer and producer of artist interviews. In my role as a director at a contemporary art gallery I occasionally conduct artist interviews myself; more often my role is that of a commissioning editor. I also read a lot of artist interviews, and enjoy sharing them if I feel they are relevant to someone's research. Together, these experiences have nurtured a strong affinity for the format. At its best, an artist interview, through the push and pull between the two participants, reaches a level of thought about artistic practice that is rarely achieved in art criticism with a single author.¹ The final, edited transcript has the potential to become an autonomous text that aides our understanding of an artist and the world they inhabit.

Over the past fifty years artist interviews have gone from rare to ubiquitous. Most monographs on living artists now contain at least one interview, as do most art journals. Locally, *Adjective*, *Arthrob* and *Art Africa* (formerly *Art South Africa*) all regularly publish artist interviews, and the format is equally popular in gallery publications. A particularly odd historical artefact is the "Interview Issue" of *Art South Africa* from 2014, which only featured a single, rather mundane,

artist interview—the rest were conversations with art professionals. Some artists speak more than others. Jane Alexander notably refuses to talk about her work; William Kentridge published three books of conversations in 2017 alone (Kentridge and Hirson, Kentridge and Morris, Garb). A laudable recent project is *Artists in Conversation*, a CD-Rom containing 14 interviews with artists based in Gauteng, produced by Telkom in collaboration with the Wits School of Arts and Wits History Workshop (2005). (It is now almost comically hard to access. The National Library in Cape Town owns a copy, but does not have facilities to view CD-Roms, and library policy prohibits the use of personal equipment to access digital records. An argument for print if I ever encountered one.)

At the time of writing, South Africa feels more fractured than it has since the mid-1990s. South Africa's Gini coefficient, a macro-economic indicator of wealth disparity, is still among the highest in the world. But the fault lines do not just lie between the haves and the have nots. The haves themselves are internally at loggerheads, with ANC-aligned wealth butting heads with more traditionally 'liberal' capitalist interests. The have-nots, too, are fighting among themselves. Crime remains highest in poor neighbourhoods, where those with little are continuously under siege, and the country witnesses seasonal 'xenophobic' attacks on both documented and undocumented residents with roots elsewhere in Africa. On top of this, we have a generational chasm, with millennial students criticising Nelson Mandela, an untouchable icon to most of their parents, for having traded nominal political freedom for continued oppression by global capitalism and its local proponents. Gender, too, is increasingly coming into focus as a site of contention; South African women are under attack in a very real, physical sense. And then there is most obvious of chasms, visible in overwhelming anecdotal evidence of increasing tension between black and white (and various shades in-between), across all class, political, national, generational, and gender divides.

James Elkins described a different kind of crisis altogether. In a much read and cited essay, he described a crisis in art criticism, which is at once "massively produced, and massively ignored" (2003: 4). This thesis will chart a certain relationship between these two crises, at first glance so decidedly different in nature, scope and gravity. Assuming for a moment that Elkins is correct, and that virtually no one reads art criticism, what can our national wounds possibly have to say about such a rarified field? Any attempt to link the two might seem frivolous, because it uses real pain and real victims to illustrate an academic debate that touches very few. But the reverse, ignoring our immediate local context while looking at the discipline and how it is practiced here, is equally frivolous.

In her book *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski presents the case that the humanities are in the grip of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (2015: 30). This phrase, borrowed from Paul Ricoeur, describes a general mood of critical writing that looks to debunk, undermine and deconstruct.

Locally, Athi Joja is one example of a critic who embodies this tendency. In a 2016 review, he accused Zanele Muholi of pandering to her white audiences:

So out of a desire to speak back to this casually circulated and enjoyed panoply of images, Muholi's imaginary riposte stumbles into coercion. Her attempt at appropriating power dries up. Power re-appropriates her instead. Her endeavor at writing with light or rather writing herself into being, being black, blacks out in the face of her existential predicament. Instead of offering a critical reflection on negrophobia, Muholi's game of parody gets entangled in negrophilia. This isn't to disavow the potentiality of subversion, but to note the risky slippage of it subsidizing the already existing white jouissance. From this point of view, activism meets stasis.

This is not the place to evaluate Joja's claims about Muholi. Critique has been a valuable tool in the writing of postcolonial accounts of art history, and Joja has been an important contributor to local art criticism, wielding his critique without fear or favour. But his harsh judgement begs the question, what other ways of writing about art might be possible? How can we give artists the benefit of the doubt? Or, in Felski's own words, "Why—even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity—is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves" (2015: 13)?

Throughout her book, Felski calls for a "wider range of affective styles and modes of argument" (2015: 3). She uses different registers to hint at what these might be, and it is worth citing some of them. According to Felski we should "try out different vocabularies and experiment with alternative ways of writing," look for "intellectual and imaginative alternatives," give space to "inspiration, invention, solace, recognition, reparation, or passion," "empathy and sympathy, recognition and identification, enchantment and absorption." And, finally, she urges writers to remember that, "art and politics are also a matter of connecting, composing, creating, coproducing, inventing, imagining [and] making possible" (2015: 193, 5, 17, 180, 18). What I will argue is that the artist interview is particularly well positioned to explore these new modes of argument, and replace a hermeneutics of suspicion with what one might call a hermeneutics of empathy.

This thesis consists of five chapters that each look closely at a single historical interview. Chapter I looks at an interview from 1977 with literary scholar Ronald Christ. It traces the history of the artist interview to the author interviews of the *Paris Review* in the mid 20th century, and plots its subsequent transition into the artworld in the 1960s. Against this backdrop, the chapter discusses the relationship of the artist interview to the categories of art history and art criticism, and its unique double status as a primary and secondary source. Lastly, the chapter deals with some of the philosophical questions posed by the interview, using Christ's observations as a springboard.

In Chapter II, an interview with N. Chabani Manganyi, celebrated as a psychologist but under-acknowledged as an art historian, offers local roots for the artist interview. It looks at Manganyi's use of the interview in his practice as a biographer, and examines some of the claims he makes for parallels between therapy and the artist interview. In this context, it relates Manganyi's

emphasis on empathy as an academic concern to Felski's use of the same word (Ngwenya 2003: 431 and Felski 2015: 180). Felski does not posit empathy as the direct opposite of suspicion, but I have selected it from Felski's suggested range of registers because it dovetails with Manganyi's position, giving it particular local relevance. (While rooted in the work of Felski and Manganyi, the term 'hermeneutics of empathy' is my own.) The chapter will also include a brief discussion of theory of the death of the author, a central feature of critique, and how abandoning jargon can broaden the audience of art criticism. Finally, the second chapter traces the roots of the phrase 'history's silences' as employed by Manganyi, and its relation to the interview.

The third and fourth chapters examine two conversations with local artists. In the third chapter, I will offer a close reading of the interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist with Ernest Mancoba. Obrist has remarked that the interview with Mancoba has become one of his most widely published texts, largely because it is one of the few conversations with Mancoba that are part of the historical record (Conversation with the author, October 2014). This is an example where an interview has directly engaged with history's silences. One only has to attempt to trace the life of Lucas Seage, or, to use an even more recent example, to attempt to write about the exhibition *Cape '09* to discover that contemporary art history in South Africa is hindered greatly by a lack of recorded information. The Obrist text is an illuminating illustration of the double nature of the artist interview as both criticism and primary source.

A filmed encounter between William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas is the topic of Chapter IV. This strained, stilted conversation is an example of a failed interview, and because it is filmed rather than written, it gives some extra-textual clues about the origins of its failure. The chapter will discuss various other failed interviews from both external sources and my own anthology project, and draw conclusions about common pitfalls. The intentional failure, a particular sub-category of failed interviews, will be explored through examples of conversations between Stacy Hardy and Lesego Rampolokeng, and Avril Herber and JM Coetzee. A last concern of this chapter is the unpredictability of failure, and what that means for the commissioning process.

In the final chapter, a fictional interview between Bernth Lindfors and Amos Tutuola illustrates the frayed edges of the genre. The emphasis on history's silences, life writing, and the interview as a primary source will be replaced by an inquiry into its role as an autonomous text, or what Betsy Sussler calls "a literature" (1997, ix). Ivan Vladislavic points out that with the advent of editing by email, the interview as a published text has become increasingly disconnected from the conversation as a historical occurrence (Reader's report M.A proposal, July 2017). The fictional interview takes that logic one step further, since it is the record of an event that did not occur in the first place. In addition to the fictional interview, this chapter will look at a few other local examples

that stretch the boundaries of the interview format, including *Exiles and Homecomings*, Manganyi's 1983 biography of Es'kia Mphahlele.

In 'Context Stinks!,' Felski asks "What would it mean for literary and cultural studies to acknowledge poems and paintings, fictional characters and narrative devices, as actors? How might our thinking change" (2011: 583)? This thesis asks, 'What if we think of these five interviews as actors?' Can these texts, separately or collectively, make an argument? And what are their "co-actors and co-dependents," and what is their "motley array of attachments and associations" (Felski 2011: 589)? The following five chapters build the case for the artist interview as an appropriate form of art criticism for our place, South Africa, and our time, the second decade of the 21st century.

Chapter I

A FORM UNTO ITSELF

“The interview is a form unto itself.” These words were written in 1997 by Betsy Sussler, founding editor of *BOMB*, an American magazine dedicated to the artist interview (1997: ix). This chapter explores the interview as a genre—its significance, its history, and its production process. Writing about interviews has become a compelling genre of its own, particularly in the last 15 years. Lawrence Grobel, best known for his *Playboy* interviews with Hollywood stars, published *The Art of the Interview* in 2004. A year later, Sarah Anne Johnson published *The Art of the Author Interview*, and in 2007, Martin Perlich put out a little guide also called *The Art of the Interview*. Other books target specific fields that rely, one way or another, on interviews, such as anthropology or law enforcement (Skinner 2012, Shearer 2005). More common than stand-alone titles about the interview are introductions to interview anthologies, a rich sub-genre. One encounters people who have thought deeply about the interview through their own practice and who have sufficiently excelled to have their work published in anthology form. Terry Gross, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Betsy Sussler, Bernth Lindfors, and David Sylvester are among the interviewers whose anthology introductions have shed light on their commitments to the interview as a format. Master interviewers all, they bring to the discipline a wide range of temperaments, attachments, and idiosyncrasies.

The conversation between N. Chabani Manganyi and Thengani Ngwenya that is the subject of the next chapter is an example of another sub-genre in the literature: the interview with the interviewer. There is something delicious about the idea, a certain circular logic that might not amount to an argument, but satisfies nonetheless. The title of an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviewing the Interviewer*, revels in that satisfaction; in a profile of Howard Stern in the *New York Times Magazine*, David Segal writes: “It wasn’t easy convincing Mr. Stern to do an interview about his skills as an interviewer [...] The irony did not elude him” (Florat 2011). A 2015 profile of Terry Gross in the same publication hinges on the profile writer’s desire to be interviewed, rather than to interview (Burton 2015).

This chapter will look at an early example of the sub-genre: *An Interview on Interviews*, a 1977 interview with Ronald Christ conducted by an anonymous editor of the *Literary Research Newsletter*. (Note how, here too, the title implies joy at the circularity of the situation.) The Christ text addresses a wide range of concerns that are relevant to my project. It was written from the trenches; in 1977, the interview was still, to use the words of the anonymous editor, “frequently regarded as a bastard tool, as quixotic, as a no-man’s land” (Christ 1977, 111). On the one hand, this dates the Christ text—no one today would consider the author or artist interview ‘quixotic.’

The format has become ubiquitous. On the other hand, the context of its publication heightens the importance of the Christ interview. It offers the contemporary reader a glimpse of what was once at stake, and how the status of the interview has not always been self-evident. It is easy to forget the radical nature of the interview format when compiling an anthology of interviews in South Africa in 2017, and the Christ interview reminds us not to.

The Christ text roots this thesis in the global history of the interview as a literary genre. In the English language, the intellectual history of the artist interview starts with the launch in 1953 of the *Paris Review*, a journal to which Christ would later become a contributor. Many of the author interviews of the *Paris Review* were subsequently anthologized in the highly successful *Writers at Work* series. Started by a group of young American writers based in Europe, the journal's primary purpose was to publish the writing of their peers. In the introduction to *Writers at Work*, Malcolm Cowley describes the initial rationale for including interviews as a rather mundane one, aimed at increasing sales: "The magazine needed famous names on the cover, but couldn't afford to pay for the contributions of famous authors. 'So let's talk to them,' somebody ventured ... 'and print what they say'" (1958: 5). Locally, one can see evidence of the pragmatism in the editorial policy of *Adjective* magazine, which relies heavily on interviews as a way to tie established artists to its publication. Cowley credits E. M. Forster, the first author to be interviewed, with pushing the format into a more thorough discursive direction than the young founders had initially imagined (1958: 5). The *Paris Review* established the "rewritten interview" or "authenticated interview" as a best practice, allowing for extensive editing, and requiring agreement on the final text from both parties (Fay 2013: 155).

The pragmatic origins of the author interview hint at a particular strength of the interview as a tool of writing history. It illustrates that using the interview model one can produce worthy content with minimal resources. Another, perhaps surprising, element of the *Paris Review* interview enterprise may be gleaned from Cowley's introduction to the anthology, namely a (perhaps unwitting) commitment to diversity:

Rereading the interviews, this time as a group, I was impressed by the extreme diversity of the characters and talents they present. The sixteen authors have come from the ruling class, the middle class, or the working class of five different countries. They are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or agnostic; old or young; married, single, or divorced; and they have had all sorts of education, from those who never finished secondary school (Simenon, Faulkner) to those who are university professors or fellows. One started life as a gunman, another as a bindle stiff, another as a soldier and government official; several went straight into professional writing (Cowley 1958: 6).

Cowley's understanding of 'diversity' might seem dated to readers with contemporary sensibilities, but it is noteworthy that such attention was paid at all in 1958.

The interview migrated to the art world about two decades later. It is important to keep in mind, as Ivan Vladislavic has pointed out, that the interview means something quite different for a writer than for a visual artist (Reader's report M.A proposal, July 2017). For the former, words are their *métier*, so an interview forms an integral part of their professional output. Visual artists are likely to speak more freely, as their words are commonly held to be secondary to their art. Put slightly differently, an image is more resilient to being spoken about than is a text. Regardless, the lineage from the *Paris Review* to later incarnations of the interview in art criticism cannot be ignored. The Christ interview also predates, by two decades, most theorizing of the artist interview, making it an important historical document for the task at hand.

Kristine Stiles, a fervent advocate for the introduction of the artist's voice in the discipline of art history, points out that "[t]he interview became popular in the numerous artist-published and -edited journals that proliferated during the 1970s and 1980s" (Stiles 2012: 3). The two most prominent publications in this regard, both based in New York, are *Avalanche*, published from 1970-1976, and *BOMB*, started in 1981 and still active. Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, founders and editors of *Avalanche*, met at a time when the art world, and the very idea of what constituted a work of art, was in flux. More than any other magazine, *Avalanche* embodied the moment where art became dematerialized, and ideas, concepts, and actions became viable counterparts to paintings and sculptures. When Bear and Sharp first started discussing the content of their newly established publication they quickly settled on interviews as its core focus: "Radical work calls for a radical approach. No intermediaries. Let those who make the work explain what they're doing and why" (Bear and Haacke 2009: 58).

The Art Workers Coalition, of which Sharp was a founding member, was an artist's rights group started in response to a dispute with MoMA over the inclusion of a work by Takis in the exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*. The Coalition included in their programme demands for inclusion of black artists and women in exhibitions at New York museums, and criticized museum boards for representing an establishment that profited from the war in Vietnam (Bear and Haacke 2009: 60). This broader political engagement of the Coalition, however, did not filter down into *Avalanche*'s content. The artists that the magazine provided a platform, though radical in other ways, were largely male and exclusively white. Presumably this is why curator Rheo Anastas distinguishes between "Sharp's own claims for a politics" and the actual achievements of the pages of the magazine (Anastas 2005: 81).

Ultimately, Bear and Sharp's focus on the artist interview was based on the requirements of a new art, rather than a broader engagement with politics. *Avalanche* did not publish reviews at all—in addition to interviews it included artists' projects and conceptual advertising that bordered on being art itself. In an evaluation of the historical importance of *Avalanche*, Amy Ballmer argues

that artists' words are of "particular importance when studying conceptual art which, by its very name, alludes to the importance of the ideas surrounding the works" (2011: 23). The emergence of conceptual art was perfectly suited to one of the interview's strengths, what Christ calls "the real business of creating character" (1977: 114). For these artists, who they *were*, who they *presented themselves to be*, and the *work they made* were all equally important components of their art.

BOMB's lineage can be traced directly to *Avalanche* through the person of Bear, who was an early collaborator of Sussler's, and regular contributor to the magazine. Moreover, Sussler acknowledges Bear and Sharp as the source of the *BOMB* interview protocol, which demands no interview is published without the interviewee's explicit consent. *BOMB* had a clearer political impetus than *Avalanche*. Says Betsy Sussler, founding editor:

When *BOMB* started the critic's voice held sway over the artist's voice, as if their thoughts about the work had to be interpreted for the world at large. It had only occurred to Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear at *Avalanche* to record the artists' own ideas. *BOMB* was saying that when an artist makes a work of art, they have a very particular thought process. It is like writing a poem, where an idea occurs, and the connections do not necessarily occur right away; but in conversation with the piece itself and with other artists revelations happen. Yet those revelations were not being brought to the fore (Interview by the author, July 2008).

Sussler's words are echoed by Saul Ostrow, writing in the preface of the 1997 anthology of the best interviews from the magazine, when he writes that *BOMB* always displayed a "fervent commitment to having artists speak for themselves" at a time when art critics and historians had become skeptical of the value of the artist's voice (in Sussler 1997: xiii, xiv).

In the period that *Avalanche* and *BOMB* appeared, South Africa felt far removed from the art scene in New York. The cultural boycott was at its height, so exchanges with artistic communities elsewhere were largely restricted to artists and writers living in exile. As a result, the surge of interest in the artist interview witnessed in New York did not reach the South African artworld. Against the backdrop of increasingly formalized state brutality, there was an effort inside the country, particularly among liberal white intellectuals, to craft a form of legitimate space for artistic and intellectual exchange. Two books from 1979 illustrate this impulse. Paul Alberts published a volume of photographic portraits of artists and writers titled *In Kamera*, with an introduction, in Afrikaans, by André P. Brink. It is a reflection on the history and philosophical implications of the photographic portrait, and is largely remarkable for what it does *not* discuss: Richard Rive and playwright Welcome Msomi are the only two black subjects out of more than sixty portraits.

The book *Conversations* by Avril Herber was part of the same awkward search for legitimacy. Visually the two books resemble one another: hard cover volumes in a coffee-table size, laid out in what passed for modern and cosmopolitan style at the time of their publication. In contrast to Alberts and Brink, Herber did acknowledge her complicated context. First, the ratio of

black participants in the project is slightly higher—four out of twenty-seven. Second, there is the beautiful subtitle of the book: *Some people, Some place, Some time: South Africa*. Third, Patrick Cullinan writes in the introduction to the book that the selection of interviewees was “not directed at eliciting any theme beyond the fact that these artists were working here, in South Africa, *at this time*” (Quoted in Herber 1979: 1, emphasis mine). Both of these phrases hint at something that they could not, or would not, say, which roots the book more firmly in reality than *In Kamera*. A fourth marked difference, which is inherent in the interview format, is that interview subjects with overt politics could bring those up in conversation, which a number of them do. Last, in a list that is not alphabetical and eschews any apparent order, Herber’s decision to open with John Kani carries unspoken weight.

The Christ interview insists on the interview as “potentially wonderful criticism” (1977: 114). Or, slightly rephrased: “Our best interviews are *forms*, not merely *contents*” (117, original emphasis). He emphasises that interviews are literary texts first and foremost—not only do those interviewed craft their responses with a particular agenda, the texts are products of an editing process and as such convey narratives the artist, interviewer, and editor wish to present. This is the central thrust of Christ’s essay, and despite the four decades that have passed since he wrote (or spoke) those words, it bears repeating. Ted Lyon, contextualizing his interviews with Jorge Luis Borges, describes the interview as “no longer spontaneous talk, nor ... quite creative writing either” (1994, 77). Notably, art historians Johanna Burton and Lisa Pasquariello also use a negative description: “not quite document, not quite literature, not quite propaganda, not quite staged voyeurism, not quite entertainment, not quite verifiable fact” (2005: 46). It seems easier to say what it is *not*, than what it *is*.

The interview as understood since the *Paris Review* falls in an autonomous category of its own. This is what Betsy Sussler means when she writes:

While questions can be prepared, and the artist’s work researched, what takes place in conversation occurs at the moment and cannot be scripted; queries arise from responses, ideas are circled and searched for ... And while most interviews are spoken, ultimately they are written. It is in this way that the poetry and spontaneity of speech becomes a literature (1997, ix).

If it becomes a literature, it is not a big leap to insist that when the interview is with an artist, the interview becomes art criticism. First, it is important to note that I use art criticism as a general term denoting any text that comments on and/or interprets works of visual art. This is to be distinguished from critique, which I use in line with Rita Felski’s writings to describe a particular form of criticism that relies on literary theory to create ‘a hermeneutics of suspicion.’¹ Second, it must be pointed out that the categorization of the artist interview as art criticism is not entirely straightforward. A case can be made that interviews, recording—as they do—the context of artistic

production, are more akin to writing art history. James Elkins, in a classic text about the state of art criticism, stumbles over the distinction between the two, and skirts the issue of the interview by not addressing it directly. According to him, if a text only gives “historical and other background information, ... art criticism would simply be art history” (2003: 36). There is, however, some evidence that Elkins would include the format in his definition. He mentions Obrist, primarily known as an interviewer, as a significant art critic (2003: 8). He also mentions the artist statement, which is akin to the authenticated interview, as a form of criticism (2003: 53). Ultimately, if some readers of this thesis object to the term as applied to interviews, they are welcome to read ‘art history’ wherever I use ‘art criticism.’

The interview anthology that is produced alongside these chapters follows the *Avalanche/BOMB* editorial policy of the rewritten, authenticated interview. While conceptually important, this presents a rather concrete obstacle. A number of the interviews commissioned for this project were delayed significantly by the authentication process. While turnaround times of a month or two were common, with some interviews there would be a six-month lag between commission and final sign-off from the participants. An interview with Mikhael Subotzky by Lwandile Fikeni illustrates some of these challenges. Subotzky, who made himself very vulnerable in the exchange, kept promising to provide feedback on the suggested edit of the text, but did not do so for weeks. It was as if, once confronted with his own words, he lost confidence in them. About two months later, he questioned the accuracy of the transcription. I assured him that we did edit for grammar, structure, and clarity, but that the words were his own. His response: “If the transcription was accurate then my ideas about how much sense I make when I speak must be inflated” (Email correspondence with the author, May 2016)! Nelisiwe Xaba, interviewed by Buhle Siwani, admitted belatedly that she had not realized the interview was for publication, and had not taken Siwani sufficiently seriously (conversation with Pamela Dlungwana, August 2017).

The Christ text addresses the significance of the editing process. He draws attention to the way in which those *Paris Review* interviews edited by George Plimpton reveal the editor’s hand. Quoting Paul West, Christ offers that “you sense the tampering, the steering, the bending to fit a pre-conceived image” (1977: 119). But if one allows for the interview as a literary genre, is it so strange that texts edited by a single editor demonstrate a certain cohesion of style? And if it is not strange, is it undesirable? When Christ insists one sees the *Paris Review* interviews as “Plimpton’s artifacts,” does that make the interviews I am commissioning and editing my artefacts (1977: 120)?

Christ pivots on the supposed dangers of editing when he recounts an episode where he presented an author with a heavily edited interview transcript, only to be thanked for having transcribed the subject’s words so carefully. Writes Christ: “In a certain sense such an interview is a trumpery, a fiction; in another, it is truer to the spirit than the literal letter could have been” (121).

Heavy editing was certainly involved in the production of the interview between Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ernest Mancoba, which will be the focus of the third chapter. Years after first encountering the text, I had the privilege of watching some footage of the proceedings. (Kemang Wa Lehulere would later use some of this footage in his moving tribute to Mancoba, a short film titled *Where, if not far away, is my place*.) Upon watching the footage it became clear that Obrist had to make some tough editorial decisions because of Mancoba's frailty in his old age, and the presence of Wonga Mancoba, Ernest's son, who kept interrupting his father. Where the text sings and dances, the footage stutters and stumbles. Yet there is no doubt that the final text is faithful to the spirit, if not the letter, of the conversation.

It is important to note that the 'tampering and steering' are not only tools available to the editor. The person interviewed, too, has considerable leeway to control (and derail) the conversation. The author Jorge Luis Borges was particularly adept at this process. Ted Lyon collected some 580 interviews with Borges, and in a 1994 paper he categorises some of the ways in which the author took control over the process and turned it into an outlet for his literary skill. If one thinks of the Christ interview as an actor, the Lyon essay is its cousin; Christ was a scholar of Latin American literature, and in 1967 he published an interview with Borges in the *Paris Review* (1967). Lyon quotes Christ's 1977 interview at several points in his paper, to reflect on the increasing popularity of the interview format and its ability to 'create character,' "that of the subject, the interviewer, or both" (Christ 1977: 113-114, quoted in Lyon 1994: 87). Moreover, in one of the interview fragments analyzed by Lyon the interviewer asks Borges about something Christ had written about his work (1994: 86).

Lyon lists the literary tools available to the interviewee as "irony of the put-on, humor, word play, self-effacing responses, questioning the interviewer, feigning ignorance and purposeful confusion." These are useful concepts when examining how interviewees behave. In South Africa, Moshekwa Langa is an artist who uses many of the same devices as Borges, both in formal interviews and informal conversations—it is no coincidence that the title of a recent solo show was *Ellipses*. In an interview with Kabelo Malatsie on the occasion of that show, the following occurs when she asks about the title of one of the drawings:

KM: Staying with language, can you talk about *Zebediela*?

ML: One has to start somewhere, right? You make a thing, then you call it a thing, then you give it nicknames and real or native names ... Sometimes it is confusing for people when they recognize it; for example, a place or a person might have more than one name. But sometimes when a thing is called by a nickname it is much more exciting, much more real or it is much closer to your remembrance of it than the official name or the official capacity (Langa 2016: 12).

Langa goes on to talk about the structure of the phrase 'I love you' in Pedi, his mother tongue, and about how someone gave him a copy of *Ulysses* when he was in high school. Only towards the end

of the interview does he circle back and actually mention Zebediela. A bit later a question about boundaries results in this exchange:

ML: What can I tell you about that? Apparently there is this thing called prayer.

KM: Prayer?

ML: Yes, it is a string of words asking or clarifying, I do not know how to describe it, and it exists in forms in many languages across cultures (Langa 2016: 31).

Here Langa feigns a misunderstanding of Malatsie's question. Of course she knows what prayer is—by repeating the word she is only asking why he brings this up seemingly out of nowhere. This pattern of 'purposeful confusion' continues throughout the text.

Its ability to distort reality might be why Christ, at the same time as he proclaimed the interview "wonderful criticism," also called it "virtually useless scholarship" (1977: 114). But this argument only holds up if one sees the sole role of scholarship to be the gathering of facts, and even then it appears a wilful exaggeration. The argument made in this thesis is parallel to Christ's, namely that the artist interview is at once pretty compelling scholarship *and* potentially wonderful criticism. To be sure, the art historian should not take claims made by artists at face-value, but that does not preclude the use of interviews as primary source material. Art critic Phyllis Tuchman, reflecting on a lifetime of conducting interviews, puts it succinctly: "When an artist interview is published for the first time, it's a work of art criticism. When it's reprinted thirty or forty years later, it's an art-historical document" (2008: 34). This double function makes the format extremely valuable; it is the only way to write about art that doubles as a primary and secondary source.

A historical example can illustrate this last point. Herber's 1979 book is no longer of particular use as an introduction to our local artistic climate. Many of the subjects are no longer active, a number have passed away, and JM Coetzee has relocated to Australia. But the interview with Coetzee retains its value as an insight into the younger self of the writer. Once my anthology starts to feel dated, a number of the interviews will retain their significance as art historical documents. Especially in South Africa, where large swaths of art history are un- or under-documented, artists' recollections are often the only source of information available. In addition, there is a dearth of art publishing (true across the globe but especially tangible locally), which means contemporary developments quickly become undocumented historical rumours.

The personality of the interviewer, what one might call his or her *interview temperament*, greatly affects the outcome of a conversation. A Terry Gross interview simply feels different from a Hans Ulrich Obrist interview, which feels different still from a conversation with Bernth Lindfors. In *An Interview on Interviews*, Christ sets up a comparison between writers Selden Rodman and Rita Guibert. The former dominated his conversations and is described as an "intrusive narrator," whereas Christ praises Guibert for being "almost invisible" (1977: 116-117). It is worth looking at

one specific example of how interview temperament can affect the outcome of an interview. Jasper Johns gave curt, sarcastic answers in an interview with Leo Steinberg:

‘Why did you cut them off just under the eyes?’ Steinberg inquires about Johns’ *Target with Four Faces*. The answer: ‘They wouldn’t have fitted into the boxes if I’d left them whole.’ 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’” (Burton and Pasuariello 2005: 46, emphasis mine).

However, an interview by Peter Fuller from 1978 undermines the notion of Johns as a notoriously reluctant foil. He answers questions articulately and generously (Bickers and Wilson 2007: 95). The contrast between these two Johns interviews is a useful reminder that finding the right conversation partner is essential for a successful interview.

It is hard to ignore the gendered nature of Christ’s comparison of Rodman and Guibert, especially since he admits to having offended Guibert by calling her “the little lady who isn’t there” (1977: 116). Confusing or conflating interview temperament and gender is a trap to avoid, especially since the history of the artist interview reveals a “discrepancy along the age-old gender line [...] There are fewer interviews published with women artists (though the number of *female interviewers* is high)” (Burton and Pasuariello 2005: 47, original emphasis). A casual glance over the interview anthologies studied for this project adds another strange dimension to the gender divide. All single author collections are by men, except for those by Terry Gross and Avril Herber. Christ concludes that he “prefers the middle-of-the-roader, who lets me understand and participate in his character just enough to justify the focused revelation of his subject” (1977: 117). This description fits Gross and Sussler as much as it does Obrist and Sylvester, which is evidence that gendered divisions are more often than not projections. Across the interviews I have commissioned, one can discern a range of temperaments.

Moreover, a range of factors determine interview temperament, not just intrusiveness or invisibility. Gross, who has conducted more than 13 000 radio interviews for the American radio station WHYY/NPR, does not speak much about herself on air, but she is hardly invisible. The tone of her voice and the calm authority of her questions all bring a strong Terry Gross-ness to the recorded conversations. A 2015 *New York Times Magazine* profile called her America’s “national interviewer” (Burton 2015). Descriptions of Gross’ interview temperament are littered throughout the text: “deft on news and subtle on history, sixth-sensey in probing personal biography and expert at examining the intricacies of artistic process,” “intelligence and empathy,” “a longing for intimacy,” “listening intently,” “asking just the right questions,” “[her] voice is briskly warm, with a luster that conveys the pleasure she takes in it as an instrument, “feeling of safety she gives her interviewees,” and “handles confessions quietly, acknowledging the weight of what’s been said without drawing undue attention to it” (Burton 2015). Comparing the picture of Gross to a

description of Obrist from a 2013 profile, stark differences emerge: “relentless archivist,” “often better-known than his subjects,” “sleepless, restless, obsessed, possessed, art, olympic,[sic] runner, volcanic, mind-blowing, limitless,” “never at a loss for words” (Simonini 2013). When comparing both Gross and Obrist, in turn, to the picture of an interview as an intellectual chess game presented by Christ and Lyon, the breadth of the interview’s promise starts to become apparent.

Interview temperament is inextricably linked to beliefs about the interview. One of Obrist’s primary concerns is with what he calls a “protest against forgetting” (2015: vii). This leads to a relentless pace, with a focus on the gathering of facts. Often his focus is on the ‘scholarship’ rather than the ‘criticism’ aspect of the interview. Obrist’s questions tend to focus on artistic practice and leave deeper psychological themes untouched. Gross, on the other hand, is interested in what she calls, quoting John Updike, the “specimen life,” a life that is “representative in its uniqueness of all the oddly unique lives in this world” (2004: xiv). To explore these specimen lives, she “grapple[s] with the most complex questions of existence— racial prejudice, faith, family, illness, morality, betrayal, gratitude” (Burton 2015). Christ offers a third goal: “the purpose of the interview is to allude to data while being about the real business of creating character” (1977: 114).

In an anthology like mine, one is presented with a range of interview temperaments. Kesivan Naidoo, speaking to Nicholas Hlobo is personal, and jocular; Thuli Gamedze presents herself as a firm ally in her conversation with Jody Brand; Khanya Mashabela dutifully takes notes as she listens, asserting herself only minimally; Pamella Dlungwana digs deep, and is not afraid to disagree; Jordan Casteel is on a sustained search for common ground; Lwandile Fikeni does his homework. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter IV, it is impossible to predict with certainty if a certain pairing of conversation partners will result in a good interview. While I had a sense of the approach of some contributors, especially if they have previously published interviews, others were new to the format. Some of the conversations I was most excited about at the beginning proved to be the least insightful once they were recorded and transcribed. While some interviews become, in the words of Sussler, “singular events in their own right,” it is important to remember that not all do (1997: ix).

Chapter II

AN UNUSUAL THING

N. Chabani Manganyi has written two biographies of South African artists—*Gerard Sekoto: 'I am an African'*² and *The Beauty of the Line*, about Dumile Feni (2004a and 2012). These two books make him one of South Africa's foremost art historians, even though he is rarely acknowledged as such. Manganyi identifies as a psychologist, the field in which he was trained academically, and when he does speak of the visual arts he couches it in terms of life writing. But even so. In his 2016 autobiography Manganyi writes: "One of the mainstays of my biography research strategies has been the interview" (2016: 71). The first chapter of this thesis focused on the international history of the artist interview; this chapter will explore how Manganyi's decades-long commitment to the interview provides the format with rich local roots. In fact, Manganyi conceived his Es'kia Mphahlele biography in 1977, the very year that the Christ interview from the previous chapter was published. Moreover, Manganyi directly addresses the interview anthology format in his autobiography. Of his decision to publish the Mphahlele interview in 1981 he observes: "This was an unusual thing to do at the time—'books of conversation', as they are referred to today, were not in vogue then" (2016: 72). Here, Manganyi explicitly positions himself as the genre's forerunner in South Africa, making a local theory of the artist interview based on his writings especially apt.

A closer look at an interview with Manganyi conducted by Thengani Ngwenya in 2002 illuminates Manganyi the art historian. Ngwenya's questions cover the theoretical ground Manganyi has occupied for more than two decades, with a particular focus on the Sekoto project. (Manganyi was yet to publish the Feni biography at the time of his conversation with Ngwenya.) Three themes relevant to the discipline of art history come into focus: first, the primacy of the interview when writing about artists, second, an awareness of the limits of critique (to use Felski's phrase), and third, a commitment to untold stories, or that part of history that is missing from the official record. If one superimposes these three themes on each other, a picture emerges of a 'hermeneutics of empathy,' an art historical method that is especially well-suited to our local landscape.

Manganyi believes in the interview as a literary text. In 1981, Manganyi published a small volume of essays with Ravan Press in Johannesburg. Titled *Looking Through The Keyhole: Dissenting Essays on the Black Experience*, its focus is the psychology of apartheid, and its topics range from university transformation to the experience of the migrant mineworker. Immediately after a brief introduction, however, the book starts with a lengthy interview with Es'kia Mphahlele. The origins of this interview are in dispute; in the interview with Ngwenya, Manganyi describes it

as “a very long interview which I did in Grahamstown at Rhodes University in one sitting as I recall” (2003: 430). More than a decade later, in his autobiography, he first calls it “a meticulous record of two lively conversations I had had with Es’kia Mphahlele,” and, a few pages later, “a composite of several interviews I had done with him,” both of which put it more firmly in the tradition of the rewritten *Paris Review* format (2016: 60, 71-72).

The Mphahlele interview in *Looking Through The Keyhole* takes up 47 of the book’s 176 pages, twice the length of the next longest text, and Manganyi explicitly states in the book’s introduction that he considers the interview to be of “immense significance” (1981: 2). He goes on to ascribe his fascination with the interview to the influence of C. Wright Mills’ theory of the ‘sociological imagination,’ which roughly states that specific lives can teach something about general conditions in society, and is akin to John Updike’s notion of ‘specimen lives’ from the previous chapter. Manganyi argues that a case study of a complex and brilliant individual such as Mphahlele, “someone equal in stature to his times,” can reveal something unique about what he calls “the soul of his culture and his society” (1981: 2). Manganyi provides texture and context to his arguments through the words of Mphahlele, which, considering that he was writing in 1981, is a progressive approach to the discipline of psychology. But if one’s purpose is to study literature or art, the logic has to be reversed. The ‘soul and culture of a society’ affects the way one looks and writes about artistic output, but not the other way around. The question then becomes what Mphahlele’s exchange with Manganyi reveals about the former *as a writer*.

Rita Felski warns against seeing works of art as either “transcendentally timeless” or “imprisoned in their moment of origin” (2011: 575). Colin Richards captures that same tension when he writes: “The challenge is to affirm the specificity of individual works, their immediate and extended materiality, while acknowledging the decisive relationship between this specificity and the social world” (2006: 60). The relevance of the Mphahlele interview far exceeds its moment of origin. The interview has a rich texture and wide range, unlike the other essays in the book, which are topically focused and rarely stray beyond the territory of psychology. While the text does not illustrate 1981 South Africa, one needs 1981 South Africa as an illustration to fully comprehend the richness of the conversation. In the introduction, Manganyi recounts how he and Mphahlele “zig-zagged our way through township life, the promise of African humanism, the nightmare of exile, the predicament of white South Africans, education, black literature and many other related themes” (1981: 3). Many of the nuances in the text would be lost without some understanding of the history of our country.

The question Felski and Richards ask of artworks is worth asking of interviews too: “How can we do justice to both their singularity and their worldliness” (Felski 2011: 576)? A simple but effective solution is to keep that very question in the back of one’s mind as one reads, considers,

and writes about specific artist interviews. When one gets carried away by a text's singularity, one must make a concerted effort to swerve back to its worldliness. If one gets bogged down in an interview's worldly context, one must remember its power as a singular text. Fortunately, interviews seem particularly well positioned to navigate this paradox. Because in the transcription and editing process, the "spontaneity of speech becomes a literature" (Sussler 1997, ix), giving it the power of singularity, while the distinct voices present in the Q&A format serve as constant reminders of its worldliness of the text.

The joy in the conversation between Manganyi and Mphahlele is palpable, and roots the conversation firmly in the world. "We were communing with ourselves and there was no question of an audience," writes Manganyi (1981: 3). Twenty years later, in the Ngwenya interview, he still calls it "one of the most exciting things I ever did" (2003: 430). It is only when writing the introduction to *Looking Through The Keyhole* that the question of an audience returned. The book was going to be published in the highly politicized South Africa of the 1980s, and many of his readers would have expected to hear explicitly how this 'communing with ourselves' related to the fight for freedom. Manganyi *had* to focus on the public relevance of Mphahlele's private life. Just like he describes abandoning the Sekoto biography for several years after he returned to South Africa from the United States, "and the country was burning and I went to the courts to defend freedom fighters" (Ngwenya 2003: 436), politics had to trump art. In 2016, however, one has the luxury to retain the bulk of Manganyi's arguments, without getting lost in what interviews might reveal about the state of the country.

In 1985, Manganyi spent a year at Yale University, during which he worked with the psychologist Daniel Levinson on the Sekoto study (Ngwenya 2003: 432). The biography that emerged from this process draws on extensive interviews with Sekoto (Manganyi 2004: ix). These Sekoto interviews fell into a strict sub-genre Levinson labelled the 'biographical interview,' which is quite different in intent from typical artist interviews. It has more in common with the way in which the American academic Bernth Lindfors interviewed Anglophone writers from West, Southern, and East Africa—as a way of gathering facts to create a historical record; in Lindfors' words, "revealing what motivated and concerned [the authors] at a particular point in time" (Lindfors 2002: v). My commissioning process turned up one such interview, too. I had asked Khanya Mashabela, a young poet and art historian from Cape Town, to interview David Koloane. When I first got back the transcript, I discovered that Mashabela had asked questions primarily about Koloane's life, and the conversation had barely touched on his art. I subsequently met with Mashabela to look at Koloane's work together, and formulate lines of questioning, after which she spoke with Koloane a second time. The final interview is an amalgamation of the two conversations.

Ngwenya asks Manganyi about his 1983 paper “Psychobiography and the truth of the subject,” in which Manganyi expounds upon his commitment to psychobiography and psychohistory. Sean Burke, a historian of literary theory, cautions against a criticism that searches for meaning in biography, because it runs the risk of treating the author as a means rather than an end; and psychobiography, in Burke’s view, is “doubtless the most florid instance of such an abuse” (2008: 206). In the introduction to the book on Dumile Feni, however, Manganyi admits that “a significant account of my early biographical writing was influenced [...] by prevailing theoretical currents in psychology and psychoanalysis, including the short-lived emergence of psychohistory and psychobiography” (2011: 1). This opens the door to a revision of his earlier commitment. He does not explicitly disavow psychobiography, but he seems to suggest that his commitment to life writing has come to stand on firmer footing, and is now less tied to the dogmas of a particular theoretical model. One can keep the interview, then, without being tied to the ‘florid abuse’ of psychobiography.

Manganyi’s background as a psychologist remains important. He highlights several parallels between therapy and the artist interview. One such parallel is that the person being interviewed determines the narrative: “Although it is the therapist who makes interpretations in treatment, it is ultimately the voice of the patient (his/her interpretation) that counts” (Ngwenya 2003: 432). In this regard it is worth looking at Manganyi’s only foray into fiction, a short story titled *Mashangu’s Reverie* (1977: 1-51). In the opening scene the eponymous protagonist sits across from a certain Dr Davies, an American psychologist, for a first session of therapy. It depicts the uncertainty of Dr Davies about whether he can help someone from a background so different to his own, and Dr Mashangu’s discomfort with the idea of seeking out the help of a psychologist. In the story, Dr Davies serves as a silent mirror in which Dr Mashangu discovers himself. One of the interviews I commissioned follows the same pattern as Dr Mashangu’s therapy sessions. Art critic Lwandile Fikeni sat down with photographer Mikhael Subotzky in February 2016. What starts out as a straightforward interview (“When did you decide to become a photographer?” “When I was 18 I...”) slowly evolves into a psychological thriller. Towards the end, Subotzky admits that “the elephant in the room is that I feel like I have lost faith in photography.” He starts interspersing his answers with curses and ends off with “I’d like to... maybe we can meet again sometime.” One can imagine Fikeni responding, as Dr Davies does in Manganyi’s short story, “Let’s see ... How about meeting twice a week? We’ll shift the time around to suit us both, okay” (1977: 3)?

Manganyi seems to have overestimated the pace at which a therapeutic culture, a culture in which it is normal to seek out help with one’s inner life, would establish itself in South Africa (1981: 99). Anecdotal evidence suggests that large segments of the South African population still consider that ‘their kind’ (Afrikaners, black people, men, etc.) do not consult psychologists.

Another essay in *Looking Through The Keyhole* describes “a great deal of talking without the equally enriching experience of listening” as “our national habit” (1981: 65). Manganyi’s comments suggest that I will need to pay particular attention to the importance of listening. Public discourse globally is increasingly marred by the echo chambers and filter bubbles facilitated by social media. Locally, the increasingly fractured nature of the media landscape has made it easier than ever not to meet South Africans with opposing views. That an interview, at its most basic level, forces the interviewer to listen to his or her subject is a useful starting point, but is not sufficient. Two interviews from my project come to mind where preconceived ideas of the interviewer obscured the intent and position of the artist being interviewed. (Neither interview survived the first round of editing, so the principles of the authenticated interview preclude me from being more specific.)

Art criticism as practised today is heavily indebted to academic literary theory, or ‘critique.’ It is tempting for the critic to forget that they are writing about an actual human being with needs, feelings, and family. Such absence of empathy in criticism can be particularly damaging in a place like South Africa, where the wounds of history are fresh. Felski challenges academia to add “empathy and sympathy, recognition and identification, enchantment and absorption” to the range of available registers (2015: 180). According to Manganyi, another parallel between the artist interview and psychotherapy lies in “the sustained use of empathy” (Ngwenya 2003: 431). Based on Manganyi and Felski, then, I would like to propose a ‘hermeneutics of empathy’ as a possible alternative, and the artist interview as a vehicle especially well-suited to this method.

The tradition of critique has particular weight in our local context, because of its close association with postcolonial theory. As Felski writes, “[f]rom the 1980s onward, an elective affinity arose between ‘French theory’ and a vanguard of queer theorists, feminists, and postcolonial scholars” (2015: 76). In addition, in the academy, critique is perceived as “virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo” (Felski 2015: 7). This makes it difficult to disown critique, or publicly debate its limits. Very quickly, one is perceived as a defender of the neo-liberal hegemony. Interviews allow one to sidestep the issue, engaging in criticism that is fundamentally empathetic, without overtly renouncing the tools of critique.

Artists tend to avoid jargon in a spoken conversation. Meleko Mokgosi’s 2014 monograph illustrates this point. The book includes a dense theoretical text written by Mokgosi himself, as well as an interview with Mokgosi by Malik Gaines, which is easy-going, even jocular at times. Asked about this contrast, Mokgosi explains how Mary Kelly, one of his mentors, used to distinguish between the objectives of her own writing and the interviews she gave. In interviews, Kelly was always aware of the implicit demand for entertainment. As a result, they were far more accessible

than her writings (Conversation with the author, March 2016). Manganyi foreshadows the central argument of Felski's *The Limits of Critique* when he accuses academics "in New England and elsewhere, who picked up Lacan, Derrida, and people like that" of sometimes not even understanding each other. "It's intellectually interesting but somewhere along the way it loses its sheen" (Ngwenya 2003: 435). Because interviews retain the voice of the artist, the accessibility they offer is not based on a dumbing-down of the subject matter. Rather, it is based on the offer of an equal exchange with the artist, a personal encounter. Such personal encounters can be invaluable in broadening the audience of art criticism.

An aspect of critique that is particularly problematic in a postcolonial context is Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author, which became popular in academia exactly around the time that queer, black, and women authors were pushing for recognition (Eileraas 2007: 47). The idea has become so ingrained in academic thinking that writers who are interested in artists and their lives feel pressure to defend their scholarly interests. For example, setting the tone for a conference of art historians dedicated to the artist interview, two art historians asked if the artist interview was a "subtle re-manifestation of the intentional fallacy," and felt a need to defend "an ongoing fascination with the interview when the author is allegedly dead and his voice silenced" (Burton and Pasquariello 2005: 47). Similarly, Bernth Lindfors pre-empts the arguments of his critics when he asks, in the introduction to a book on biographical criticism, "Why should anyone today take an interest in something so old-fashioned as the relationship between a human being and a literary text" (1999, vii)? In South Africa, where debates about agency, and who speaks for whom, are pressing and omnipresent, the notion of the death of the author risks silencing diverse voices.

Of course, the author never really died. Burke gives an account of the idea's birth and ascent to academic orthodoxy in the *The Death and Return of the Author*, first published in 1992. He draws attention to the inherent contradiction of an author declaring the death of his own species: "Everywhere, under the auspices of its absence, the concept of the author remains active, the notion of the return of the author being simply a belated recognition of this critical blindness" (165). Even Barthes himself seemed far less committed to the death of the author than many scholars who use his theory. In *Camera Lucida* he writes evocatively of a photograph of his mother, which he does not reproduce because "it exists only for [him]" (1981: 73). In the absence of an author, that picture would look the same to anyone.

Hlonipha Mokoena offers another reason to be aware of the limits of critique when writing South African (art) history. She makes the argument that the relevance of literary theory to a particular subject matter is inversely proportional to the amount of academic study that subject matter has already received. When the subject matter one studies has thus far received scant critical

attention, the writer's responsibility is first and foremost to the primary material (Conversation with the author, January 2016). One would neglect this responsibility if one were to focus on Barthes, Foucault, or Derrida. Given Manganyi's commitment to 'history's silences,' which I will turn to next, this last reason is perhaps the most important one. One is actively restoring a historical record when writing about Mphahlele, Sekoto, or Feni, and theory could hinder that process.

Early on in the conversation Manganyi offers the phrase that becomes the title of Ngwenya's interview: "[T]here are two statements that I'll always remember as having been very formative in my experience and work in the area of biography. The one statement, *and I don't recall who made it*, reads something like, 'to make history's silences speak'" (Ngwenya 2003: 429, emphasis mine). There is a certain beauty in a biographer admitting to the failures of human memory. And this is no ordinary lapse of the 'where did I put my keys' variety. Manganyi forgets where he first came across a phrase that he goes on to call "very profound," which, in his own view, lies at the basis of his academic work and reverberates strongly through the Ngwenya interview. These parameters alone make its origins significant. But it also just *feels right*, instinctively, when applied to the writing of South African history in general, and the rewriting of South African art history in particular.

The phrase and its presence in Manganyi's theoretical framework invite a speculative origin story. For a concept so succinct and usable, its actual use is rare. A handful of references to the Ngwenya interview and the odd uncited mention of 'history's silences' in academic literary research do little to illuminate Manganyi's discovery of the statement. In any event, most postdate the 2002 interview. When using Google to search for the exact phrase 'making history's silences speak,' the first plausible source that appears is a 1998 article from the *New Republic* by literary critic Lee Siegel. In this essay, Siegel uses the term 'history's silences' several times, among them stating that "Foucault stressed the importance of making history's silences speak" (1998). This is a misattribution. The quote Siegel uses to illustrate his point comes from a passage in *The History of Sexuality* that does not contain the term 'history's silences.'³ Since the concept does not appear verbatim in Foucault, and Siegel offers the same modifier ('making speak') that Manganyi recalls, it is plausible that Manganyi first encountered the phrase in Siegel's essay. There is further circumstantial evidence for this theory. Manganyi would have been familiar with the *New Republic* from his time in the States, and reading the text in a generalist publication like that, perhaps on an plane, would explain why he does not remember the encounter. Siegel's piece was only published a few years before the Ngwenya conversation and would have been fresh in Manganyi's mind.

While plausible, the Siegel theory is not fully satisfying. The five years between the *New Republic* piece and the Ngwenya interview hardly allow for the phrase to have been "always remembered as very formative" by Manganyi. Instead, the Siegel theory requires Manganyi to have

retroactively inscribed the phrase into his own intellectual biography. While such revisionist memories are possible, and probably common, it sits uncomfortably with Manganyi's awareness of the pitfalls of biography. Google offers further help: except for mentions of Manganyi, 'making history's silences speak' as a search result appears in one source besides Siegel, namely a footnote of a 1984 article by the American intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra, in which he quotes from a book review by Lionel Gossman (LaCapra 1984: 308).

It is likely that Manganyi read the LaCapra article. It discusses the relationship between psychology and historiography—the exact intersection at which Manganyi's interests reside—and it was published by an American academic just one year prior to the year Manganyi spent at Yale. It is also possible that he read the original book review by Gossman, which was published in April 1983 in *The American Historical Review*. In either scenario (and maybe he read *both*), the timing fits. Moreover, it explains why the phrase does not appear in an article Manganyi published on psychobiography that in many other ways foreshadows the Ngwenya interview. He had not yet encountered the phrase or had not yet fully incorporated it into his method (1983b).

Thankfully, the LaCapra/Gossman footnote gives us the origins of the phrase. Gossman correctly attributes it to the 19th century French historian Jules Michelet. In a poetic turn of intellectual history, it was Barthes who, in 1954, published a small volume on the life and work of Michelet, in which the full original context of the phrase can be found:

There must be more; the words must be heard which were never spoken, which remained deep in their hearts (search your own, they are there); the silences of history must be made to speak, those terrible pedal points in which history says nothing more, and which are precisely its most tragic accents. Then only will the dead be resigned to the sepulcher. They are beginning to understand their destiny, to restore the dissonances to a sweeter harmony, to say among themselves, and in a whisper, the last words of Oedipus: Remember me (Quoted in Barthes 1954, 102-103).

Michelet's concern, by way of Barthes, Gossman, LaCapra, and Manganyi, dovetails with a concept often used by Hans Ulrich Obrist, the most prominent interviewer of artists working today. Borrowing from the historian Eric Hobsbawm, Obrist describes his own ongoing interview project as a "protest against forgetting" (Eastham 2012). This is the same sentiment expressed by Manganyi when explaining his choice of Mphahlele and Sekoto as biographical subjects: "there are many black South Africans like these two who are unknown to large segments of our society but who deserve to be heard" (Ngwenya 2003: 429).

It is this shared commitment to history's silences that explains why Obrist's interview with the South African painter Ernest Mancoba is included in a 2015 anthology of Obrist's favourite interviews, alongside 18 others with much better known artists and architects. Writes Obrist:

I met [Mancoba] when he was 97 years old in a retirement home in Paris. The interview came out of this idea of a protest against forgetting. I felt shocked by the idea that the French art world had never really taken into account that he lived there—he was completely neglected; it was an amnesia (in Wa Lehulere 2015: 233-234).

The Mancoba interview—the subject of the next chapter—has a similarly sweeping scope to the Mphahlele interview in terms of time, geography, and ideas. Mancoba died shortly after the Obrist interview, and that text has been instrumental in the re-imagination of his work and its global importance.

History's silences are related to the use of empathy in scholarly work. Manganyi calls his own protest against forgetting a "moral imperative," and in his introduction to *The Beauty of the Line* quotes P.J. Eakin who "writes about the meaning and significance of writing counter narratives, life stories that 'damaged' people write to 'restore themselves to full moral respect,' especially in post-colonial and race supremacist societies" (2012: 2). Njabulo Ndebele echoes these comments in an 1986 interview with Bernth Lindfors: Ndebele describes an academic project he started at Yale aimed at helping "young writers know what their predecessors have been saying about the art of writing," which involves going back to "very old documents to pick up statements on art, fiction and poetry." This reveals an investment in a trans-generational conversation. For this reason, Ndebele describes the "systematic destruction of the oppressed's sense of constructive cultural history" as one of the crimes of apartheid (in Lindfors 2002: 242-243). Kemang Wa Lehulere mirrors the commitment of Manganyi and Ndebele. His exhibition *History Will Break Your Heart*, first shown in Grahamstown in July 2015, includes work by Gladys Mgudlandlu and Mancoba, as well as a sculptural installation dedicated to the poet R.R.R. Dhlomo. Wa Lehulere laments the fact that Mancoba was not part of the curriculum at the University of the Witwatersrand when he studied there. In an interview with Obrist he describes Mancoba as "almost invisible in South African history" (2015: 235).

Yet, Wa Lehulere also cautions against "getting trapped" in the discourse of erasure—what he calls the "challenge of not getting caught up in the idea of exclusion itself"—which can lead to writing about historical gaps rather than imaginatively rewriting history (2015: 235). He specifically criticizes recent art historical writing on Mgudlandlu for discussing her erasure from art history, without discussing the work itself (2015: 126). David Atwell, in relation to Manganyi's writing, uses the succinct term "cultural restitution" to describe the process of filling gaps and cautions that this "emphasis keeps faith with historical knowledge [...] rather than abandoning it" (Quoted in Manganyi 2016: 77). South African museums often discuss transformation in terms of 'gaps in the collection,' as if there are just some holes that need plugging, rather than a need for a more thorough and systematic retelling of art history. Cultural restitution cannot be accomplished by merely adding Mphahlele, Mancoba, Sekoto, or Mgudlandlu to the canon. In *The Empire Writes*

Back, one of the foundational texts in postcolonial studies, the authors write: “A canon is not a body of texts per se, but rather a set of reading practices” (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 186). They also offer a more complex reading of the term ‘silence’ specifically in relation to South African literary history. They emphasise that these silences are not neutral, but have roots in violent state suppression (1989: 83). An awareness of history’s silences and a commitment to cultural restitution are important when writing art history, but require vigilance.

This chapter has made the case for a hermeneutics of empathy—an art historical method, or reading strategy, based on Manganyi’s programme, consisting of the primacy of the interview, an awareness of the limits of critique, and a commitment to history’s silences. Using this method, the Ngwenya/Manganyi interview doubles in importance. Wondrously, the text itself does everything it argues texts ought to do; it is an interview, it resists delving into theory, and it looks at the work of Manganyi who—at least in terms of his potential contribution to the field of art history—has not been given his proper due. Moreover, it is an interview about interviews, with a man who has pioneered the use of the artist and author interview in South Africa. This makes it a text of ‘immense importance,’ much like the Manganyi/Mphahlele interview that formed the cornerstone of *Looking Through The Keyhole*. Bruno Latour, an intellectual ally of Felski’s, paints a picture of a new kind of critic: “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (Latour 2004: 246). I intend the ‘book of conversations’ that I am developing to be such an arena.

Chapter III

A REVELATION

In the early 1920s, at an Anglican teacher's college called Grace-Dieu, near Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal, now Limpopo, Ernest Mancoba discussed art and politics in what he terms a "constant dialogue" with fellow students Gerard Sekoto and Thomas Masekela. A decade later, living in Cape Town, he describes having "intense conversations" with Lippy Lipschitz, an artist and Lithuanian émigré. Mancoba struck up a friendship with a group of Danish surrealist painters as a student in Paris around the time of the Second World War, among them Ejler Bille and Christian Poulsen. He characterizes that friendship as a "fruitful dialogue and collaboration" in a spirit of intellectual camaraderie. From the 1950s through the early 1960s he had a "rich dialogue for many years" with Madeleine Rousseau, the editor of arts magazine *Le Musée Vivant*. These instances are spread across four decades and anchored in three distinct locales—rural South Africa, urban Cape Town, and the Parisian metropolis. Mancoba discusses them in an interview with the well-known museum director and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, conducted months before Mancoba's death (Obrist 2015: 96-103). If one sees interviews as actors, this particular interview is the hero of the story told in these chapters.

It is worth examining, in Felski's terms, the "co-actors and codependents" of the Mancoba interview and its "motley array of attachments and associations" (2011: 583). Its co-dependents would include Hans Ulrich Obrist, who conducted the interview, and Wonga Mancoba, who was present during the filming. Kemang Wa Lehulere comes to mind as well, as an artist who has used footage of the interview in his work. Attachments include Alberto Giacometti, Paris, the CoBrA group, and the francophone *négritude* tradition. Gerard Sekoto, too, would be an attachment and by proxy his biographer N. Chabani Manganyi. Furthermore there are the publications that have reprinted the original interview. One might also include Rasheed Araeen, the British artist and theorist, and his study of Mancoba's life. Further relatives of the Obrist interview are the artist's other known writings, Elza Miles' biography, and the SABC documentary made about his life.

Elza Miles' 1994 biography of Mancoba, the only other significant source of information on the artist, draws heavily on interviews. In addition to those conducted by the author herself in 1990, Miles credits two interviews conducted with Mancoba in 1993 by Alex Laird as important sources, and at several points in the text she quotes from an interview between Troels Andersen and Mancoba from 1972 (1994: 8). The latter interview is included in Miles' book. It appears in the chapter "Mancoba's views on life and art," which is curiously positioned at the end of the book, after the biographical summary, bibliography, and the catalogue of known works. The font is smaller than that of Miles' own text, as if to illustrate its secondary importance, and it runs over

three columns rather than two. Without discrediting Miles' achievement, I would suggest an artist's own views on life and art ought not to be an afterthought.

The Obrist/Mancoba interview most recently appeared in a volume by Obrist titled *Lives of the Artists, Lives of the Architects*, published by Penguin. The title of that book invokes Vasari's classic text, the prototype for all subsequent interview anthologies. Obrist has probably recorded and published more artist interviews than anyone else has in history, and this recent anthology forms a greatest hits compilation of sorts. Mancoba's inclusion is curious in the sense that the other featured artists and architects are, without fail, well-known; Mancoba is presented alongside Gerhard Richter, Louise Bourgeois, and Rem Koolhaas. Appropriately, his interview comes right after that of Elaine Sturtevant, and right before that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, two figures who loom large in the rewriting of art history to include peripheral or marginal positions. Its august company is a testament to the singular power of the Mancoba interview, and it illustrates the potential of an interview to alter art history. Mancoba's legacy would have looked markedly different in the absence of the Obrist interview—the distribution network of Penguin as a publisher, and the recognisability of Obrist's name, ensure an audience for this interview that is significantly larger, by several orders of magnitude, than the typical audience for South Africa's modern painters.

Like many published artist interviews, the texts in Obrist's *Lives* are prefaced by brief narrative introductions. It is worth reading Obrist's introduction to his interview with Mancoba closely (2015: 94). He starts by saying that he "came across Ernest Mancoba's work when I was researching CoBrA, an avant-garde movement which was based in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam in the late 1940s." This is innocent enough, but it is worth noting that there is little evidence of CoBrA being a sustained research interest for Obrist. It is more likely that during some cursory reading, he stumbled on the character of Mancoba and decided to follow its strand. "Then I started to hear young artists speaking about him more and more often as a key influence on their thinking, although he was still not widely known." I have prodded Obrist on occasion to tell me more about these 'young artists,' but to no avail.

Of course Obrist discovered Mancoba *somewhere*, and there is no reason to believe that he did not hear a young artist or two mention his name. If he had been a 'key influence' on anyone's thinking, however, one would imagine there to be evidence of this, either in someone's writing or someone's art. Moreover, from Obrist's other writings one can glean that he has a tendency to be specific about historical networks of influence—if he had remembered who told him about Mancoba, he would have most likely credited the artist by name in this introduction. Instead, I would venture that the description is classic Obrist hyperbole. When something might be interesting, Obrist tends to describe it as 'extremely urgent,' and a chance encounter quickly gets described as a 'true miracle.' He is acutely aware of his influence, and in all likelihood saw this

introduction as an opportunity to further burnish the reputation of Mancoba, an artist he holds very dear. Obrist continues:

So I decided to interview him. I met him in 2002 when he was living on the outskirts of Paris in a retirement home. We had a long conversation on his art and Apartheid and South African politics that was filmed, and then published several times because it's one of the very few interviews he gave.

[...]

This is also part of my series of interviews with centenarians (such as Oscar Niemeyer), an idea the German artist Rosemarie Trockel has encouraged me to pursue as a protest against forgetting (2015: 94).

The footage of the interview was initially lost in Obrist's unwieldy archive, but about a decade after the event he found tapes containing fifty minutes of footage, perhaps a third of the conversation. The rest of the video documentation of the conversation is considered lost, though Obrist suspects the audio recording must still exist in full. The footage reveals a frail, struggling, and at times angry Mancoba. He mostly speaks in English, but occasionally a French or Danish word creeps into the conversation. His memory is failing him, and one can see him fight his own mind attempting to trace particular memories. The exchange embodies Obrist's 'protest against forgetting' beautifully, as it is not just Obrist who protests, but also Mancoba who is almost physically protesting his own forgetting.

Obrist's pursuit of 'centenarians' recalls the *Paris Review*'s commitment to interviewing authors "in the winters of their careers" (Philip Gourevitch, quoted in Fay 2013: 167). Obrist's last-minute addition to the record of Mancoba's life is a reminder of the fleeting nature of memory and information. This document would not have existed had the peripatetic Obrist reached the outskirts of Paris a few months later. In his foreword to the Dumile Feni biography *The Beauty of the Line*, Manganyi laments the fact that he has to produce the book "without the opportunity to listen and speak to him" (Manganyi 2012: 2). Introductory texts on South African art often fall in the trap of an obsession with the young and the new. But artists in the winters of their career are an integral part of our artworld. Their longer temporal horizons provide insights younger artists cannot, and moreover, the time to get them on the record is limited. This means that for the anthology, one has to make an effort to include people like Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, or David Goldblatt, and perhaps posthumously Ernest Mancoba himself, Peter Clarke, or Gladys Mgudlandlu. Moreover, the unpublished Sekoto interviews by Manganyi come to mind, but also the interviews by Miles with Mancoba that enabled her to write the biography—if records of them still exist (Ngwenya 2003: 430). Among the interviews I have already commissioned are conversations between Khanya Mashabela and David Koloane and between Kabelo Malatsie and Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, and a fictional interview with Ernest Cole by Bongani Madondo.

Because the footage shows such a frail Mancoba, Obrist judged it insensitive to make it publicly available. Instead, he shared it with Wa Lehlere, with the request for the artist to act as a

mediator, preserving what is beautiful and moving about the footage, but respecting its deeply personal nature. The result is *Where, if not far away, is my place?* a 2015 short film (or work of video art) first included in a group exhibition inspired by Mancoba's life and work at Foundation De 11 Lijnen in Oudenberg, Belgium, and later in Wa Lehlere's solo exhibition *History Will Break Your Heart*. The process by which the footage came in Wa Lehlere's possession, and the subsequent approach he has taken to the material, are wonderful examples of a hermeneutics of empathy at play. Even the title of his exhibition, *History Will Break Your Heart*, suggests a turn away from suspicion towards empathy.

Wa Lehlere reflects on the process of making the film: "The difficulty was also partly trying to decide what to do with it. Do I make something that's a tribute to him or do I take it and run with it and do something abstract" (2015: 234)? He chooses particular moments from the footage and weaves them together with bits of text and more associative drawings. Significantly, in the first scene, Mancoba recalls an incident early on in his life, where he saw a young black man delivering milk involved in an accident in the white area of town, and no one came to his aid. This anecdote did not make its way into the published Obrist interview, so the film adds a layer, or in Felski's term, an 'association' that previously did not exist. Mancoba's telling of this story brings to mind Es'kia Mphahlele's assertion that "Being in that condition of exile you want to tell the world what South Africa is like. What it means to grow up in South Africa right from day one" (Lütge Coullie et al. 2006: 247).

What makes certain interviews more successful than others? Betsy Sussler suggests that interviews succeed "either because of the chemistry between the participants, the revelatory nature of the exchange, or the fluidity of the language" (1997: ix). But these factors are not present in the Mancoba interview. The text reveals Obrist as a competent and persistent interviewer, but there is little evidence of chemistry. There are some revelatory moments in the text, but I would not describe it in its entirety as revelatory. And the language is adequate but not exceptional. Daniel Levinson, mentor to Manganyi, claims that a successful interview requires "a relationship of some intimacy, intensity, and duration" (Quoted in Manganyi 2016: 73). Again, this fails to explain the success of the Mancoba text. While Obrist's temperament guarantees a certain intensity, intimacy and duration were largely absent given the circumstances under which the interview took place. Manganyi's own description of his Mphahlele interview offers another set of markers of a successful interview: a "sense of adventure, discovery, and 'imaginative engagement'" (78). These too fail to account for the importance of the Obrist/Mancoba conversation.

Usha Wilders offers an alternative explanation of which interviews endure, one that resonates more strongly with the Mancoba example. In a wide-ranging evaluation of the *Paris Review*, she notes that some interviews become an "important critical document which broadened

the understanding of the author and his craft” (2008: 208). By this Wilders means that these interviews are republished in subsequent volumes on the author, and quoted extensively in secondary literature on their life and work. Wilders examines two case studies of *Paris Review* conversations that became influential in the critical literature on their subjects. The first is the William Faulkner interview from 1956. Faulkner went on the record so rarely, that “the fact that Faulkner had decided to speak out about his work was almost world news” (206). Moreover, in the carefully constructed interview Faulkner spoke “in fine and communicative form as he move[d] from the sacred to the secular, from the somber to the satiric” (Harvey Breit, quoted in Wilders 2008: 207). The other example is an interview with Ernest Hemingway that was published in 1958—one of the only two official interviews the author ever gave and considered more insightful than his posthumously published memoirs (208). From these examples it seems that a combination of rarity, scope, and form together result in an interview of outsized critical influence. All these factors are present in the Mancoba interview. It is one of the few interviews with him ever published, and the scope of the ideas discussed in the interview is staggering. It remains concise while veering from the colloquial and anecdotal to the highly systematic and theoretical.

I was surprised to observe how the interviews I commissioned quickly became important documents, especially for the younger artists. This is largely due to the fact that there is a paucity of critical writing on their work. One of the first interviews that was finalized was a conversation between Pamella Dlungwana and Bogosi Sekhukhuni. It is not long, but it deals directly with a number of different strands in his practice that had not previously been written about in a meaningful way. Sekhukhuni subsequently used the interview in a catalogue, and it is now one of the first texts people encounter when researching his work. The interview between Thuli Gamedze and Jody Brand is likely to function in a similar way. Little has been written about Brand’s work, and Gamedze allows Brand to carefully plot her practice and political positions.

Obrist asks about Mancoba’s beginnings as an artist as his first question, which is especially important because few people are familiar with Mancoba. Most of the other interviews in the volume start *in medias res*, with a question about a particular project or concept. It is only when Obrist speaks with Monir Farmanfarmaian, the Iranian counterpart to Mancoba, that he also starts by asking about her background (2015: 279). These two examples are reminders of the importance of recording facts and providing historical context for interviews with lesser-known figures. It is tempting to avoid biographical questions because they can seem common, boring even, but it is important to keep in mind a broad audience. Biographical background embedded in the conversation itself will allow texts to travel without much external contextualization. One of the surprises of my research has been how easily biography became the focal point of the conversations I commissioned. Kesivan Naidoo and Nicholas Hlobo largely dwell on Hlobo’s life journey, at the

expense of time spent discussing his artistic strategies. More often than not, I had to urge the interviewers in the opposite direction, towards artistic practice and philosophy.

Terry Gross suggests that a good interview searches for “a revelation about [a] guest’s life that might lead, in turn, to a revelation about his art” (2004: xi). The Obrist text does exactly that. It is in the biographical part of the interview that Mancoba mentions an early friendship with Gerard Sekoto, another major figure in the history of modern painting in South Africa. Mancoba brings up Sekoto twice more in the interview, first when he credits Sekoto with keeping him up to date with the discussions of other artists and intellectuals in Paris (2015: 103) and afterwards when he recounts how he introduced Sekoto to reproductions of Van Gogh paintings: “[I] told him the story of this Dutch painter’s life while we stood in the middle of the bush, near a distant country village in a tribal zone of the northern Transvaal” (107).

Sekoto was ‘rediscovered’ much earlier than Mancoba, and a much wider literature exists on his life and work, most notably N. Chabani Manganyi’s biography. It is this part of the interview that recalls Manganyi’s invocation of Mills, his insistence that one can learn about a particular place and time through learning about particular exceptional individuals. Mancoba tells a story about a Native Affairs Commissioner who wanted him to carve figurines of animals. He refused. This anecdote sets Mancoba up as an artist searching for freedom, in line with the classic conception of the modern artist.

What makes the interview stand out from other sources on Mancoba, however, is that it goes well beyond biography. Miles’ book is a thoroughly researched account of his life, but is limited in its assessment of his artistic practice. A documentary by Bridget Thompson from the same year, *Ernest Mancoba At Home*, similarly delves into his life story without achieving much by way of analysis of his work. Wa Lehlere observes: “A lot of people write about exclusion, they choose to write about the memory of his exclusion rather than his work as a form of protest” (2015: 236). He is thinking of texts like Rasheed Araeen’s *A Challenge for Africa*, which focuses on Mancoba’s erasure from history but only briefly discusses his paintings or philosophy (Araeen 2004). This distinction is a fine one, and can be mapped onto the distinction between sympathy and empathy. Outrage at someone’s omission is a sign of sympathy, but for a true hermeneutics of empathy it is important to listen to what they had to say in the first place.

It is when Obrist asks about the relationship between figuration and abstraction that the interview offers an insight into Mancoba’s painting practice. He declares that he aims for “the strongest effect and by the lightest means possible” (2015: 104). This puts him at odds with the more expressionistic style traditionally associated with CoBrA. Wa Lehlere describes that “there is something delicate about [Mancoba’s works], emotionally also, very, very sensitive” (2015: 236). This sense of the emotive springs from Mancoba’s belief, expressed in the interview, that what

makes a thing beautiful is “its capacity to evoke the inner being, by the strength of the outward aspect” (Obrist 2015: 105). Manganyi wrote something strikingly similar in 1977: “it is art at its best that explodes for our usually mundane consciousness those resonances which lie buried in man’s innermost being” (1977: 55). Mancoba believes in art as something deeply felt, which he contrasts with the “misunderstandings around Duchamp” that have undergirded much new art:

Duchamp never pretended that exhibiting a manufactured product was, in itself, art. But the world, the so-called ‘art world’, has always behaved as if he had. In fact, as he himself insisted, his readymade, bought at the supermarket and put upon a pedestal, is only a challenge thrown at the face of the Academy and its *spiritually empty canons*. However, the misunderstanding became the accepted interpretation of this artist because it fitted into the aims of a certain *established nihilism*, which, under the fastidious form of an objective aestheticism, in turn came to constitute a sort of new academicism. Hence the development, among many creators, of a more or less imposed or self-imposed notion of non-art considered as art, which had the advantage of getting rid of the problem posed in a materialistic society by the invisible and by the enduring power of the universal mask without ever facing the question ‘What is art’ (Obrist 2015: 105-106, emphasis mine)?

In a few sentences, Mancoba convincingly challenges the dominant discourse of art history in the 20th century. While speaking about the beliefs that undergird his own art making, his words have far-reaching implications and offer a potential basis for a theory of art rooted in a spiritual humanism. Where Picasso, and later many of the members of CoBrA, drew on African art for formal innovations, Mancoba suggests drawing on African beliefs for the theoretical basis of art. It is important to note the difference between his argument and the one made by Chinua Achebe about the ‘human purpose’ of African literature. Achebe argues that African writers privileged other values from their European counterparts—whereas Mancoba suggests that all art, universally, ought to be concerned with this deeper humanism (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 125). Mancoba’s invocation of established nihilism echoes Felski’s hermeneutics of suspicion, and critique could easily be accused of being a ‘new academism.’ Where I call for a hermeneutics of empathy in art criticism, Mancoba seems to invoke something similar as a theory of art itself. Sussler has said that an interview ultimately strives for “a revelation or two” (Quoted in Johnson 2005: 101). The above reflection on Duchamp is that revelation for the Obrist/Mancoba text.

The twin miracles of the Mancoba interview are *that it happened*, and *what was said*. Because of the immensity of the achievement, one might forget that certain things were *not* said. The interview does not speak about Mancoba’s artistic exchange with his wife Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, while certain formal similarities between their work suggest an intimate creative relationship. One is also left to wonder what happened to the decades-long friendship with Sekoto, which does not seem to have survived. I would further posit that Mancoba’s claim to have never met Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire is dubious. There is no discussion of his choice of palette,

scale, or his dogged commitment to painting the same image decade after decade. During the editing process for my anthology, there were several instances where artists asked to have certain statements removed. Most often, these statements accurately reflected the artist's beliefs, but they did not want them on the historical record, because they would needlessly offend.

These are reminders that no interview ought to be the last word on an artist. Manganyi says of his Sekoto biography, "I wanted to generate sufficient curiosity about Sekoto so that other people [...] could follow this up" (Ngwenya 2003: 437). Often interviewers will ask about things an artist has said in the past, partly out of sincere interest, partly to signal they have done their research. But it is also useful to do the opposite, to mine existing texts for gaps and determine what artists have *not* spoken about in the past. I once asked Meschac Gaba about the use of humour in his work, which I felt was an aspect that had not received sufficient attention. It resulted in an enthusiastic response from Gaba, which set the tone for a wonderful interview (in Gaba 2007: 32). Mashabela's conversation with Bronwyn Katz digs deeply into Katz' choice of materials and process, which in the writing about her work to date has been of secondary importance to her biography.

Mancoba says that after reading *La Sculpture Nègre Primitive* by Paul Guillaume he "began to think about how enriching it would be to have an exchange of ideas with such an open mind, who spoke with such deep respect about the expression of Africans ... when I wasn't even considered a full human being in my own country" (Obrist 2015: 97). A little later, Mancoba stresses that he left because "in South Africa, I had not been able to find anyone with whom to discuss the work." So he decided, as his mother had predicted, to find his brothers "in the greater world" (Obrist 2015: 99). His choice of words is strikingly similar to that of Dennis Brutus: "When apartheid South Africa affirmed that I was less than human, only humans could vote, I had to assert that I was not part of that society; I became a citizen of the world" (Lütge Coullie et al. 2006: 247) .

Brutus and Mancoba's sentiments are a testament to the centrality of exchange in creative life, to the need to be part of a bigger conversation, so to speak. The interview is a particularly appropriate format for writing about Mancoba, given the importance of conversation to his working process and major life decisions—his early conversations with peers in South Africa, his desire to find people with whom to discuss the arts of Africa that led to his departure for Europe, and his later dialogues with the Danes he befriended in Paris. Imagine for a moment what it might have looked like if his early conversations with Lipschitz, Stern, Masekela, and Sekoto had been recorded, transcribed, edited, and published.

In a significant sense, an anthology of South African artists discussing their work with other artists and critics becomes a tribute to Mancoba. Happily, Obrist has given permission to include the Mancoba interview (as well as his interviews with Kemang Wa Lehulere and Peter Clarke), which will contextualize the contemporary interviews, as well as highlight the potential of the

interview as a lasting document. Still, for every interview that succeeds, another one fails to meet expectations. Working on my anthology, I commissioned several interviews that in all likelihood will not make the final cut. That illustrates why it is harder to find examples of failed interviews: they often do not make it into the public domain. Yet, some do, and in the next chapter I will take a closer look at a few examples. I will ask what some of the common causes of failure are, and what failed interviews can teach us about the format, and its potential.

Chapter IV

BUT ANYWAY...

It is the best of formats, it is the worst of formats. While a well-produced interview has the ability to transcend, as illustrated in the last chapter, too often interviews merely skirt the edges of criticism. Those are the texts that give the interview its reputation as a lazy critic's tool. This reputation is not undeserved—somehow the perception persists, even among informed art world professionals, that one can 'just do' an interview. The unspoken assumption is that, because the interview relies on the artist's voice, relatively little is required on the part of the interviewer to produce copy worth reading. As someone who has both conducted and commissioned failed interviews, I look at them with empathy and admiration. Predicting magic is impossible.

This chapter takes a filmed rather than a written interview as its primary subject matter. *In Conversation: Kentridge & Dumas* is a 2009 documentary directed by Catherine Meyburgh, a film maker who would go on to collaborate with William Kentridge on his production of *The Nose*. Like the Mancoba interview, it is local, relatively recent, and the participants are important figures in art history. But there is a deeper logic to the decision to focus on a film rather than a text. So often what does not work in a conversation is not verbal, and does not survive transcription. Watching footage of an interview gives clues, through body language, intonation, and pacing, about where the fault lines that undermine the attempt are located. It also makes the analysis more intimate. With words on a page, it is easier to slip into what Felski calls a 'mood' of critical detachment (2015: 21). In Felski's words, "mood accompanies and modulates thought; it affects how we find ourselves in relation to a particular object." Faced with close-ups of Kentridge and Dumas, seeing the doubt or discomfort in their eyes, allows a compassionate look at the interview as a human failure. For my project, it is important to note that the 'mood' of watching a failed interview is similar to the 'mood' of discovering an interview that I have commissioned has not worked as anticipated. I always know one of the participants personally, often both. I am dealing with people and personalities, hopes and disappointments. There is little room for critical distance in the commissioning process.

Ivan Vladislavic has pointed out that the choice of a filmed conversation leads to a certain asymmetry with the other chapters, and might limit the scope of my conclusions (Reader's report M.A Proposal). He suggests it might be better to examine a failed interview more similar to Obrist's encounter with Mancoba: a written, published text. Yet, there are several obstacles to this approach (admittedly acknowledged by Vladislavic). Most obviously, most unsuccessful interviews are culled by editors and never published. Failed interviews that do make it in to print can be divided into several loosely conceived and overlapping categories. The most obvious one is the

journalistic interview, where an arts or culture journalist asks questions of an artist for the purposes of ‘covering’ an exhibition or an award. These usually take the form of a profile, but it is increasingly common to find a classic *Avalanche*-style Q&A in magazines and newspapers. These interviews are limited in ambition, and as a result not particularly interesting as failures.

Other texts have all the formal trappings of an artist interview, but none of the depth. Today, contemporary art functions as a luxury good, and a source of entertainment in the experience economy, in addition to its critical impetus. These parallel realities affect art criticism. Online platforms such as *Artnet News* and *Art.sy* are particularly guilty of eschewing serious critical engagement in interviews, but print publications are not innocent in this matter either. And while one is more likely to find journalese in mid-brow titles like *ArtReview* and *Art in America* than in *Art Forum* and *Frieze*, even the latter occasionally slip up. In print, *BOMB*’s standards remain high, but online one finds interviews that fail to live up to the magazine’s reputation. One relatively recent example was an interview with Robin Rhode on the occasion of his simultaneous shows in New York City at the Drawing Center and Lehman Maupin (Norman 2008). Tellingly, the interviewer is described in her bio as a “writer and culture maker,” not an artist or an art critic. More often than not, these ‘soft’ interviews are dictated by commerce, and appear at the prompting of a PR professional on the occasion of a new exhibition by the artist. The conversation with Rhode traverses the kind of information one might typically glean from a press release, without prompting him to reveal something deeper about his work in the show.

Someone is not necessarily an adept interviewer just because one is a good artist, skilled writer, or sharp critic. For my anthology, I approached Thuli Gamedze, a young critic based in Cape Town, to conduct an interview with the photographer Jody Brand. Gamedze is an excellent writer, and I consider her one of South Africa’s most promising new critics. When she sent through the audio file of her conversation with Brand, she noted that “in the process I wondered whether I am good at interviewing artists! I found myself scrambling to explain my questions quite often” (Email to the author, May 2017). Thankfully she was a better interviewer than she gave herself credit for, but her comment was notable in its acknowledgement of the task at hand, and suggests she underestimated its difficulty. Other contributors were less self-reflective. One participant in my project failed to conduct interviews that were of any use. Because she is a good writer, a good conversationalist, and an intelligent reader, it simply did not occur to her that she might be a lousy interviewer.

The mirror image of the previous category is one where failure can be ascribed to the interviewee. For an editor, this can be a sensitive issue. One presumably commissions an interview because one admires an artist, and publishing an interview where the subject appears inarticulate or uninteresting can open them up to criticism, or worse, ridicule. Yet, few artists are confident and

comfortable enough to be told that they do not speak well about their work. Once an interview is commissioned and fails for this reason, it is difficult to decide against publishing it without offending the interviewee. A 1954 interview for the *Paris Review* with William Styron, then a 28 year-old writer, is remembered for its failure. Styron had been “so taken with himself” that he did not “revise, expand, amend” the text as he was urged to do by editors George Plimpton and Peter Matthiessen (Fay 2013: 166). Styron had a close relationship with the editors of the *Review*, and the interview made it to print anyway. Still, in Plimpton’s view it had “failed as a literary interview” (167).

Perhaps the most interesting category of all is interviews that fail because of lack of rapport. These texts do not lack genuine aspiration to be something more, and curiously these failures can happen to skilled interviewers and worthy subjects. Conversations between Hans Ulrich Obrist and people like Rem Koolhaas, Etel Adnan, and Ai Weiwei are among the best art criticism produced today. Yet, Obrist would be the first to admit that not every conversation he has nor even every interview he publishes transcends the moment it was recorded. The fact that something as vague and emotive as ‘rapport’ can be central to effective art criticism opens up wonderful questions about the need for empathy in writing about art. Of course, rapport and empathy are not one and the same. Rapport can be established in the absence of empathy, and similarly empathy can be present in the absence of rapport. In psychology, Manganyi’s primary field of research, rapport and empathy are often discussed in relation to each other when speaking about the therapist-patient relationship. Moreover, both empathy and rapport allude to a dimension of interpersonal relationships that cannot be captured in strictly logical or rational terms.

My anthology aims to pair people who have existing relationships, or who otherwise share certain sets of experiences that suggest rapport is likely. Inevitably this will be a process of trial and error. I expected that introducing Bongani Madondo to Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, for example, would spark an ongoing chemistry that would produce a strong text. They are a generation apart, and both hail from Hammanskraal and settled in Johannesburg in search of a community of arts and letters. When I received the transcript, however, it soon became clear that the interview would not make it to the final selection for my anthology. Madondo had, by his own account, admired Sebidi from a distance for two decades. During that time he seemed to have developed an idea of who Sebidi was, which hindered the conversation. From the transcript it was impossible to tell what constituted Sebidi’s own worldview, and what was Madondo’s projection.

Similarly, a visit by Robin Rhode to the home of Peter Clarke, a few months before Clarke passed away, failed to generate an interview worth publishing. The pairing of interviewer and interviewee was similar to the Madondo/Sebidi match—Rhode and Clarke both come from educated, middle class ‘coloured’ backgrounds, and have similar tastes in music and poetry.

Moreover, they are both excellent draughtsmen with a particular investment in abstraction. Yet, the audio file of their encounter was never sent for transcription because their conversation failed to transcend an awkward, stilted Q&A. From these two examples, it almost seems as if there a mysterious force at play that undermines conversations where the expectations are too high.

The Meyburgh film appears to fall victim to that same force. The encounter between Dumas and Kentridge is characterized by friction rather than chemistry. At the core of this perceived friction lies Kentridge's apparent lack of curiosity about Dumas. One example presents itself about five minutes into the film, when Kentridge remarks on Dumas' ink wash portraits. For a fraction of a second one anticipates a question, for he genuinely seems to admire these works. He immediately circles back on himself, however, telling Dumas about what the drawings invoke in him, rather than asking her about where and how they originated. Dumas interjects, aware of the expectation of an exchange, when he proceeds to talk about his own relationship with the medium of painting. At the 6m14s mark, as Dumas speaks about the painting process, Kentridge lowers his eyes, struggling to camouflage his boredom. A few seconds later, he raises his eyebrows in a skeptical frown. At this point Dumas turns her attention to an anonymous third party at the table, positioned behind the camera, looking for duplication, or even just engagement. (This third party is presumably Meyburgh, the film's director.) Until the end of the take, Dumas' attention remains focused on this off-screen presence, only looking at Kentridge occasionally. Around the 17 minute mark, Kentridge starts to follow her lead, and is now also largely speaking to the third party. This dynamic continues for the rest of the film.

As a result, the flow of the conversation, at least in its edited form, moves away from the traditional Q&A into alternating monologues. It lacks obvious transitions between topics, which creates the impression that questions are asked that the audience does not get to hear, presumably because they are asked off-screen. There is one notable exception. When Kentridge brings up Dumas' paintings of nude babies (*The First People*, 1991), he appears disturbed and uncomfortable. Sensing an opening, Dumas responds gleefully "I would like to ask you, do you find my babies ugly" (23m19s)? Put on the spot, Kentridge looks away, as if to ask the third party for help, looks up, smiles, and responds "I think I do." The look on his face suggests amusement at his indiscretion. There is a brief moment of shared laughter, a hint of rapport. It is the first crack in their composed appearance, and as I watched it for the first time I sat on the edge of my seat, eager to see if this would move the conversation in a new direction.

Instead, perhaps afraid to offend, Kentridge's corrects himself and says that he is not sure, that he is unsure what 'beauty' means. One is left to imagine the turn the conversation could have taken if Kentridge had been more adamant: "Yes, Marlene, these are the ugliest things I have ever seen. What on earth were you thinking?!" In the introduction to *Selves in Question*, an anthology

of interviews about life writing in South Africa, the editors warn that “[t]he interview is commonly characterized by a degree of politeness: in general, a strong element of wanting to please, which may affect either or both of the interlocutors, may facilitate communication, but it may also make the interview less effective” (Lütge Coullie et al. 2006: 65). Politesse, then, poses certain risks for the commissioning editor. One can imagine that young interviewers engaging much older artists might defer to them, and are less likely to push when they are unhappy with answers. This occurred, for example, when I commissioned a conversation between Khanya Mashabela, an art historian in her mid-twenties, and David Koloane. She was deeply polite, and took his responses at face value.

Returning to Kentridge and Dumas, it is worth looking at the curious gender dynamic that is at play. At 19m53s, Kentridge repeats a phrase he heard from his drawing teacher: “In a man lines mean character, and in a drawing of a woman lines mean age.” Dumas appears pained, and looks down in acknowledgement of the weight of these words. The words take on a subtext that could explain the palpable tension at the table. Kentridge continues to speak about the aging female body, purportedly in art, and a wonderful moment occurs. Dumas pushes back, proclaiming to find traditional western notions of young, blonde female beauty ugly. As if scripted, Kentridge’s jaw drops in surprise (20m39s). A question about a beautiful David Goldblatt photograph of a “god awful piece of dusty veld” is his coded response, leading to a painful moment where it is unclear what, in fact, is being discussed.

None of this suggests that Kentridge, or Dumas for that matter, did not endeavour to make the project work. When the conversation comes to a halt, one or the other generally asks a question in an attempt at salvaging the moment. They are, after all, professionals at work. In a particularly dry example, 22 minutes in, Kentridge asks Dumas if her titles come before or after the works are painted. In itself this is interesting to know, but it is also a stock question that one could ask virtually any artist and does not suggest a particular investment in the particularities of Dumas’ practice. (Fortunately it draws out one of Dumas’ most unexpected and tender responses, in which she speaks about her relationship with her daughter.)

Rather than a lack of commitment to the project, we witness a mismatch of character and temperament. Towards the end of the conversation Dumas wonders if she should be more disciplined, and “prepare myself before I come to situations like this” (1h08m45s). Dumas laments that she is an evening person while Kentridge is a morning person, putting her at a disadvantage. (Presumably the conversation was taped early in the day.) Dumas suggests that this set-up makes Kentridge look more intelligent than she is, giving an indication that she, too, considers the interview to have failed. Dumas continues: “I want more power in a real sense.” Mirroring Kentridge’s self-correction after the ‘ugly baby’ comment, she immediately laughs off her suggestion, but one is left with the lingering feeling that she has felt disempowered during the

conversation. Evidence that Dumas is indeed an evening person can be found in the opening sequence of the film, when Dumas arrives at Kentridge's home at dusk, bottle of wine in hand, and in good spirits. But it also masks a deeper mismatch in temperament: Dumas is irreverent, and suspicious of mind and language, while Kentridge is composed, and lives in and for mind and language.

A shared meal often builds rapport, and the film concludes with a dinner sequence. During the dinner, Dumas and Kentridge appear to revisit the day they have just shared, with each making light of the idiosyncrasies of each other's conversational style. When this leads to tension, Dumas again stops herself, concluding with a loaded "But anyway..." followed by a look of regret (Meyburgh 2009: 1h09m55s). In a touching moment, trying to smooth things over, the two get up from the table together to get second helpings. The film concludes with a shot of them sitting in a garden, filmed from the back. This scene is notable for the absence of audio, but also for the suggestion, whether real or the result of clever editing, of a newfound rapport.

It is worth returning to that word, rapport, and the intangible quality it describes. A conversation between Dumas and Barbara Bloom reveals what rapport can achieve (*pressPLAY*: 150-161). This exchange took place about ten years prior to the filming of the Meyburgh documentary, but it is not the temporal distance between the two that is most striking. Rather, it is Bloom's ability to engage with Dumas, drawing out observations and points of view that are filled with a sense of urgency. Evidence of a friendship is littered throughout the text, for example when Bloom recalls "I should mention [a question] you asked me many years ago: 'Would you still love me if I stopped making art?' I said, 'Of course'" (151). Or, when Dumas says to Bloom: "You and I have a whole friendship predicated on living to lie in bed and talk or watch TV" (151). They share a frame of reference, get excited about each other's examples, and only just stop short of finishing each other's sentences. The result is a rather magical text. Poetically, the same Phaidon anthology offers a superb interview with Kentridge, conducted by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, a longtime collaborator (*pressPLAY*: 407-420). Mutual familiarity is on display in this interview too, for example Christov-Bakargiev starts a question with "You once mentioned to me" (414)... Christov-Bakargiev speaks Kentridge's heady language and infuses her questions with references to art and philosophy of the 19th- and 20th centuries.

Initially, I underestimated the significance of familiarity in the commissioning process. A number of interviews I set up would be first-time encounters, for example between Mashabela and Koloane, as well as Jordan Casteel and Zander Blom. The former required a second meeting between interviewer and subject to come alive, while the Casteel/Blom text required heavy editing with Casteel's input, and subsequent additions by Blom. Interviews between friends, such as Kabelo Malatsie's interview with Sabelo Mlangeni and Kesivan Naidoo's conversation with

Nicholas Hlobo, brimmed with the kind of joy that stems from intimacy. There were exceptions, too. Gamedze and Brand did not know one another, but quickly established common ground; the conversation between Lwandile Fikeni and Mikhael Subotzky was the result of a first-time encounter, too, and is one of the best texts to come out of my project. Politesse, or rather its absence, might account for these exceptions. Neither Gamedze nor Fikeni hold back, and both Brand and Subotzky give as good as they get.

In addition to the presence of rapport, and the unhurriedness it brings, the other obvious difference between the Phaidon interviews and the Meyburgh film is that the former feature Dumas and Kentridge solely as the interviewees, rather than in a dual role where they are also expected to ask questions. Both seem infinitely more comfortable being interviewed than interviewing. This recalls an anecdote about another failed interview featuring Kentridge, one that did make it to print. The June 2008 issue of *Modern Painters* features a conversation between Robin Rhode and Kentridge that offers little by way of insight into either artist. Asked about this encounter many years later, Rhode recounted a situation where both artists had arrived at the agreed time, each expecting to be the person answering, rather than asking the questions (Conversation with the author, September 2015). Neither was prepared, and the result was a rather superficial exchange.

A similar dynamic occurred under my very eyes in June of 2017. I set up a conversation between Nicholas Hlobo and Zanele Muholi for a project unrelated to the anthology. I felt particularly good about this idea, because with all my research on the artist interview I knew what worked: Hlobo and Muholi have a shared history—they have been acquainted for over a decade, during which they shared gallery representation, a social circle in Johannesburg, and a similar international network. Their careers had developed more or less in tandem; Muholi is now probably the more famous of the two, though Hlobo's success came earlier. Moreover, they both explicitly tackle homosexuality in South Africa in their work, and they share a light, joyful way of being in the world. I had engaged the services of Malatsie, who had worked with both of them during her time at Stevenson, to orchestrate and record the conversation. The result was a several hour-long tea party, during which little of substance was discussed. I had failed to take into account Hlobo and Muholi's disinterest in the world outside themselves. Both are spectacular interviewees (as can be gauged from the interview with Hlobo by Naidoo for my anthology, or a recent interview by Renée Mussai with Muholi), but make for lousy interviewers (Mussai 2017). The same appears to be true of Kentridge and, to a lesser extent, Dumas. They are interested primarily in themselves.

The example of *In Conversation: Kentridge & Dumas* is one of inadvertent failure. Two other local interviews are illustrations of another genre—the interview that fails intentionally. In the Avril Herber book of interviews with South African artists and writers, discussed in the first chapter, one stands out. The interview with JM Coetzee, still John Coetzee in 1979, is the only text

presented in the Q&A format. Of this choice, all Herber writes in the acknowledgements is that “the working process is exposed to some extent, resulting in a different presentation” (1979: xi). In fact, the rationale for this exposure is similar to the decision to focus on the Dumas/Kentridge film for this chapter. The more that is revealed of the process leading to the text, the more its failure has the ability to be instructive—and in this particular instance, is *intended* to be instructive. When Coetzee takes issue with Herber’s opening question, the following exchange occurs:

AH: Maybe I put the question badly?

JMC: No, I think there is a real difference of substance between you and me.

AH: I don’t say I understand things in a particular way. Maybe I’m asking to understand or know another way. Maybe mine is an unformed question?

JMC: No. I think it is a very well formed question. The trouble I have with it is that for me there is no difference between exploring the motive behind the work and writing the work itself [...] So how can I answer your question (Herber 1979: 174)?

This terse tone continues throughout the text. The terseness is ambiguous, however. In giving the reasons for his supposed unwillingness to answer Herber’s questions, Coetzee the writer offers very particular insights into his literary philosophy.⁴

Stacy Hardy recounts an attempt at interviewing Lesego Rampolokeng, who at that stage had been a friend for over a decade. A mention of a deadline suggests the interview was commissioned, but was also a deeply felt urge by Hardy:

Maybe it was this glitch, the stark difference between public reputation and my own experience that provoked me to pursue an interview. Was I testing him? Seeking a way to make sense of the disjunctive relations that informed both his life and his writing? Looking for some kind of affirmation of our friendship—an E.T. moment where we finally find language and stutter f-r-i-e-n-d? Did I hope to emerge with a neat manifesto that would lay out a new set of potentials and limits of friendship in its functioning at once as a concept and as a practice?

I should have known better. Lesego refused to comply (Hardy and Rampolokeng 2016: 52) ...

Hardy posits that the failure of the interview embodied its success. Rampolokeng’s resistance to the process revealed more about friendship, its intended subject matter, than a straightforward conversation could have. She describes how he engineered the failure, how he “simply ignored and elided many of my questions, didn’t concern himself with making some kind of sense: clarifying points, connecting streams of thought, ‘putting things well.’” This is of course a different form of resistance from Coetzee’s, who displayed an obsession with clarification and ‘putting things well.’ Yet, both writers were aware of their interlocutor’s desired outcome, and refused to comply.

Unlike Dumas, Rampolokeng and Coetzee succeed in thwarting the interviewer. Dumas spoke of a decision to be more difficult in interview situations, more reluctant, in an interview for *W Magazine* conducted around the same time as the filming of the Meyburgh documentary. She felt she had earned the right, at her age, to engage interviews on her own terms (Bagley 2008). Dumas

immediately acknowledges that she generally fails to do so, as she starts seeing her interlocutor as a person, not an enemy. (Which begs the question, can empathy lead to failure as well as success? Or at least a failure to fail well?) What Dumas laments when she sighs that she would like more “power in a real sense” is a failure to live up to the implications of her own decision to be difficult and demanding.

Betsy Sussler stresses that interviews are ‘developed.’ “sometimes the initial conversation is not enough—we really believe strongly in several drafts, what I call the Hans Hoffman push-pull; some ideas are pulled out, and others that are not going anywhere are pulled back, and off the page” (Interview by the author, July 2008). This process is more difficult with a filmed interview, where surroundings and light can reveal discontinuities. Dumas and Kentridge are both busy people who I imagine would not naturally seek out each other’s company. All of these factors make it difficult to return to the conversation and ‘develop’ it in the sense that Sussler employs the word. Meyburgh successfully introduces additional footage of studio visits with both artists, images of artwork, and talks given on other occasions. This succeeds in giving a fuller, more nuanced view of each artist, but it sidesteps the conversation, the film’s supposed premise. Only half of the documentary consists of footage of the conversation between Dumas and Kentridge. Exchanges where they directly engage each other are the muddled low-points of the film, and take up less than a quarter of its total running time.

Ultimately, failures are proof that the interview is an art form, not a short cut. That even a conversation between thoughtful, successful, and highly articulate artists like Kentridge and Dumas can produce an unsatisfactory result is a stark reminder of the difficulty of compiling an anthology of new, worthwhile artist interviews. It is hard to come up with a set of rules to avoid failure. Because putting two very well-known artists together did not work in the Meyburgh film, and the Hlobo/Muholi example, does not mean it can never work. The exchange between Chris Ofili and Peter Doig in the Fall 2007 issue of *BOMB* is an inspired text on what it means to be painter, though in the introduction to that interview Leon Wainwright does note how unusual such an occurrence is: “The relaxed humor and friendship of these artists might seem incongruous given the intensity and seriousness of their careers” (2008: 32). Yet, if one was tempted based on the strength of the Bloom/Dumas and Ofili/Doig interviews to only pair people with longstanding friendships, one runs the risk of missing out on the next Obrist/Mancoba text. They had not met before the day the interview was recorded. And if one follows the lead of the *Paris Review*, and only interviews artists ‘in the winter of their careers,’ one might miss the chance of interviewing a future legend in their early years, like Herber’s 39-year-old John Coetzee. Rather than setting rules, it is important to anticipate unexpected failures, and unlikely successes, and acknowledge both. If predicting magic is impossible, it becomes all the more important to recognize it when it happens.

Chapter V

A TRUMPERY, A FICTION

And many people were interviewing me. I remember one long interview with Femi Osofisan, Akinwumi Isola, Steve Shaba, and Jare Ajayi, which I had shortly before I came to this side of the River. There was this young man...eeeh, what is his name again... yes, Dapo Adeniyi, who talked with me many times and said my work was good. I like my interview he published in his journal, *The River Prawn*.

-Amos Tutuola (in Osundare 2002: 7)

Tutuola's words, taken from an interview with Bernth Lindfors, emphasise the pleasure he derives from speaking about his work. They echo the sentiments Ernest Mancoba expresses in his conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Unlike the Mancoba interview, however, the Tutuola interview is fictional. It was written by Niyi Osundare and first published in 2002, fifteen years after Tutuola's death.

The interview is set up as a phone call from heaven, in which Tutuola calls Lindfors to check in on his old friend. After describing the mechanics of the afterlife, the conversation turns to Tutuola's reputation. He is more celebrated in heaven than he was on earth, because the "Alives" are "too selfish to know good things" (Osundare 2002: 4). Osundare introduces an extensive discussion of Tutuola's critical reception, by having Lindfors bring up the scholar Dylan Thomas and a new book on Tutuola by Oyekan Owomoyela (6-7). He settles a score regarding a controversy about Tutuola allegedly borrowing from the oral literature of Chief D.O. Fagunwa, by depicting him as posthumously giving Tutuola his blessing (9). The critical purpose of the interview seems to be taking stock of Tutuola's reputation, while paying tribute to Lindfors as a pivotal figure in the study of the writer's work.

The Osundare text reveals some of the frayed edges of the interview format. Where the previous four chapters each made a specific argument, this chapter is more concerned with loose ends: ideas and possibilities that lie beyond the scope of the current project. First, it will look at two subconscious fears that affect the interview genre. Second, it will look at a handful of local examples that gesture beyond the classic *Paris Review* format: a letter exchange between Khwezi Gule and Kemang Wa Lehulere, the 'failed' interview between Stacy Hardy and Lesego Rampolokeng briefly discussed in the previous chapter, and *Exiles and Homecomings*, a 1983 biography of Es'kia Mphahlele. In closing I will speculate what, if anything, the frayed edges could mean for my anthology.

It was the *Paris Review* that "resurrected" and codified the rewritten, Q&A format interview (Fay 2013: 155). *Avalanche* introduced the format to the visual arts. Because it has become

ubiquitous over the past forty years, it is necessary to ask if it has grown stale. Ronald Christ, whose thoughts on the interview formed the backbone of the first chapter, muses that “the great future of the interview—if it has one—lies in the direction of the greater realization of its own form, its own capacity to sustain itself. In the direction of ‘entertainment’ if you must” (1977: 113). The fictional Tutuola interview is one example of Christ’s suggestion. If the interview is a literary genre, after all, why can one not use it as a format to write third-party criticism? Christ, in the interview that was the focus of the first chapter, offers that “[i]n a certain sense such an interview is a trumpery, a fiction; in another, it is truer to the spirit than the literal letter could have been” (1977: 121). He was speaking of the rewritten interview, but it is equally applicable to Osundare.

Christ argues that interviews are literary documents, creating character rather than recording facts. In more or less explicit form this argument crops up in a number of reflections on the genre. Vasari’s *Lives* is, by today’s scholarly standards, essentially a work of fiction. Osundare merely takes this to its logical conclusion. Speaking of scholarly ambivalence about Vasari’s texts, Paul Barolsky suggests that “[o]ur fear and evasion of Vasari’s fiction has even deeper roots. Our disquiet stems from the fear that however scrupulous we are in writing factual art history, our own writing will be a form of unwitting fiction” (in Barriault et al. 2005: 33). Barolsky calls upon the discipline of art history to acknowledge and embrace the fact that it is engaged in the business of shaping narratives. Vasari’s contribution is an emphasis on form, which Barolsky suggests the discipline has lost due to its persistent fear of fiction.

The Osundare text also shines light on a darker subtext of the artist interview, which has been present in previous chapters but never explicitly acknowledged: the fear of death. Margaret Atwood proposes that all writing is “motivated, deep down, by a fear and fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (2003: 140). That is of course exactly what Osundare does when he has Tutuola phone Lindfors from “Unreturnable Heaven’s Town, the land of the Deads” (2002: 1). Atwood argues further that “[i]f the act of writing charts the process of thought, it’s a process that leaves a trail, like a series of fossilized footprints. Other art forms can last and last—painting, sculpture, music—but they do not survive as *voice*” (Atwood 2002: 142, original emphasis).

While Atwood’s argument concerns writing in general, it is easy to see how it might apply to artist interviews in particular. What is an interview but the recording of an artist’s voice for posterity? Atwood ends her musings with a quote from Ovid: “But still, the fates will leave me my voice, and by my voice I shall be known” (2002: 161). Obrist’s ‘protest against forgetting’ takes on an altogether deeper, darker meaning seen in this light. Underneath his public display of intellectual voraciousness lurks the abyss of death. Similarly, Atwood’s argument urges us to think twice about Manganyi’s commitment to history’s silences. If their stories are not told, Manganyi

might seem to suggest, artists and writers will have lived and died in vain. A concern with posterity and a fear of death are two sides of the same coin. Atwood's theory can explain the emergence of the editorial policy of the authenticated interview. Betsy Sussler defends this policy because "both participants get to say what they want, exactly the way they want, without misinterpretation" (1997: ix). What is fear of misinterpretation if not fear of death?

In more prosaic terms, Osundare's fictional interview asks questions about the genre's formal possibilities. Some local experiments with the conversation format suggest that one can expand the boundaries of the Q&A format while retaining many of the qualities that make the interview an effective form of criticism. Wa Lehulere's 2015 catalogue features a letter exchange between Wa Lehulere and Khwezi Gule, in addition to a classic artist interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist. Seemingly initiated by Gule without publication in mind, at some point during the exchange it became clear that it might be published. At that point, what started as an exchange in the age-old tradition of literary correspondence became an edited text with a particular purpose. As such, it has more in common with the rewritten interview than with the collections, often published posthumously, of correspondence by well-known individuals. Gule motivates his decision to return to letter writing as follows:

Obviously typing something on a keyboard is much faster than writing it out by hand—the brain is much faster and we have become used to sms language. We hardly have time to really let things sink in. Writing everything out by hand is a slower process. It forces the brain to slow down as well, to think more carefully and to allow other association and ruminations to intervene (in Wa Lehulere 2015: 10).

Gule's choice results in an incredibly effective text, partly because it mimics the slow, percolating nature of Wa Lehulere's artistic practice. It allows for reflection, and sidesteps certain issues because each letter responds to the totality of the previous one, rather than to individual questions.

Stacy Hardy and Lesego Rampolokeng's 'failed' interview opens another door to endless possibilities for the format (Hardy and Rampolokeng 2016). Hardy reveals the mechanics of the process, letting the rewriting and rethinking infiltrate the end result. William Kentridge, in the 1998 interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, offers a useful visual analogy to Hardy's process:

Both the traces left on the drawings in the animated films and the double performance of manipulator and puppet in the theatre works were borne of unresolved problems. When I began drawing, I tried very hard to make perfect erasures. I later understood that the traces left on the paper were integral to the drawing's meaning. In theatre, we first tried a number of ways of hiding the manipulators, behind screens or in the shadow; it appeared to us as a failure that we couldn't hide them. It was only halfway through rehearsing [...] *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), that we realized the visible manipulators were an asset (*pressPLAY*: 413).

Hardy reveals the mechanics of the interview format, and exactly how it failed her. In that regard the text has an affinity with Janet Malcolm's classic essay *Forty-one False Starts* from 1994, in which the writer attempts, and fails, to write a profile of the painter David Salle, based on a series

of interviews (2013: 3). In so doing Hardy has produced a noteworthy literary document. She describes the process: “As our discussions ran and emails criss-crossed—often aimed not at but past each other—the interview became a transcription of those cries. Less a conversation than a monologue, it came as a stream of consciousness delivered in the form of memories, anecdotes and confessions, as poems and snippets of autobiography” (Hardy 2016: 52). I would caution against too much transparency, even though Hardy and Kentridge employ it successfully. They are masters of their craft. In lesser hands, exposure of the inner workings might diminish the magic of a well-written interview. Thinking of my own commissioning process, much of the editing is prosaic, focused on style, clarity, and the order in which things are discussed.

N. Chabani Manganyi expresses a commitment to a wide audience in the introduction to *Exiles and Homecomings*, the 1983 biography of Es’kia Mphahlele: “I set myself the aim in this study of producing a readable and informative biography for both scholars and the general public” (1983a: 7). Chapter two discussed Manganyi’s use of interviews as the foundation of his biographical method. *Exiles and Homecomings* is radical in its choice of a first-person narrative for a book that is neither fiction, nor autobiography. Moreover, the text is interspersed with sections of dialogue. Manganyi declares to have written in the “spirit of the new *avant-garde* biography” (1983a: 5). He goes on to quote Leon Edel:

The duty of biographical narrative is to sort out themes and patterns not dates and mundane calendar events which sort themselves. This can be accomplished by use of those very devices that have given narrative strength to fiction—flashbacks, retrospective chapters, summary chapters, jumps from childhood to maturity, glimpses of the future, forays into the past—that is the way we live and move; art can be derived from this knowledge (Quoted in Manganyi 1983a: 5).

This description of *avant-garde* biography as understood in the early 1980s recalls Barolsky’s emphasis on the literary aspect of history writing. The search for ‘themes and patterns,’ moreover, is reminiscent of Christ’s description of the interview as being about the “business of creating character” (1977: 114). The example of *Exiles and Homecomings* might be too far removed from the classic Q&A format to still qualify as an interview, but it shows that Manganyi already experimented with the literary potential of the conversation in the early 1980s.

I will include some artists in my anthology who are no longer alive, such as Mancoba, Dumile Feni, Ernest Cole, and Peter Clarke. One approach is to locate un- or under-published conversations. For Mancoba, the solution is to include the Obrist interview, because it lies at the core of the project on so many levels. Osundare suggests another possibility: the posthumous interview. The Lindfors/Tutuola example gives some useful parameters. The author of the fictional interview needs to be a writer, first and foremost. The author must have a particular understanding of the life and work of those he or she is attempting to channel. And, the author must have an interest in biography and the interview as a literary format. I would further add that it ought to be

used sparingly, given the risks of misrepresentation on the one hand and hagiography on the other. For the anthology, it is worth considering posthumous interviews only for those artists whose influence on today's scene is palpable, and for whom no interviews of the calibre required can be traced. One text that I have commissioned with these guidelines in mind is an interview with Ernest Cole by Bongani Madondo. Perhaps it succumbs to Atwood's fear of death, but at least it overcomes the fear of fiction.

The Wa Lehulere and Rampolokeng examples encourage further experiments with form. Where the slow, drawn out process of letter writing might be effective to probe Wa Lehulere's work, it is conceivable that for some other artists the opposite might work. Could an interview happen on Facebook? Whatsapp? Snapchat? How does one retain the literary aspect when using new forms of communication? The Hardy/Rampolokeng text offers a template on how to present 'failed' interview processes. Yet, for the anthology it is worth keeping in mind the audience. Christ and Meleko Mokgosi both employ the word entertainment, but that word tends to arouse suspicion. One could couch it in more general terms; Manganyi aimed to "produc[e] a readable biography for both scholars and the general public" (1983a: 7). My anthology will have a similar double aim. While formal experiments might have a place—and I imagine it will include at least one posthumous interview, and one letter exchange—these experiments should not alienate or obscure.

CONCLUSION

This thesis proposes the notion of a ‘hermeneutics of empathy’ as a way of thinking about artist interviews. This is a theoretical model, a wonderful phrase that draws together the work of N. Chabani Manganyi and Rita Felski, and suggests why the artist interview might be of interest, particularly here, particularly now. *An Interview on Interviews* by Ronald Christ drove the first chapter. It put the interview in historical perspective, and asked some difficult questions about the editing process. The interview of Thengani Ngwenya with N. Chabani Manganyi, the subject of Chapter II, provided the artist interview with local roots. Chapter III looked at a conversation between Ernest Mancoba, arguably the most important South African artist of the 20th century, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, the current standard bearer of the artist interview. That text is evidence of the need to record history before it evaporates, of the insight a good interview can offer in an artist’s life and work, and of the interview’s potential of a rich afterlife. In the fourth chapter, a conversation presented itself that did not live up to the high expectations of its participants or its producers. This failed interview contributes to our understanding of the pitfalls of the format, its limits, and the uncertainty of the outcome. If artists as articulate as William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas can produce a failed interview, then anyone can. The final chapter spoke about a fictional interview with Amos Tutuola written by Niyi Osundare. This interview illustrates how the interview project is in part driven by the twin fears of death and fiction. As an experiment with the genre it also tries to answer questions about the interview’s literary potential beyond the *Paris Review* format.

The idea of a hermeneutics of empathy opens up a range of possibilities beyond its relation to the artist interview. What could such a hermeneutics look like outside the discipline of art criticism? What are the limits of empathy in (literary) theory? Significantly, the phrase appears in the subtitle of a 1988 book by Karl F. Morrison, *I Am You: The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology, and Art*. The scope of this thesis is too limited to discuss the work of Felski and Manganyi in relation to Morrison. More broadly, the use of empathy in the humanities would benefit from more extensive analysis than I am able to offer here.

Commissioning artist interviews turned out to be far more challenging than I had anticipated. My experience with the process was based on artists I had a professional connection to, most often as their gallerist. This meant that the commissioning process was embedded in a much richer network of mutual commitments, obligations and expectations. I spoke to the artists regularly anyway, so it was easy to check up on the progress of an interview. Moreover, often we were working towards a publication deadline, so it was easy to exert some pressure to manifest the desired result. Working with artists I did not know well was a new process for me. As I discussed

in some detail in the first chapter, it took several months to finalize the conversation between Lwandile Fikeni and Mikhael Subotzky, the first text I commissioned. This turned out to be more the rule than the exception. At the time of writing, several other interviews are somewhere between the initial proposal and a final edited transcript. The hermeneutics of empathy had to extend beyond its role as a theoretical model, into a practical guideline.

Some unanticipated things happened. A wonderful working relationship developed between Pamella Dlungwana and myself. Dlungwana, an arts administrator and poet, has been transcribing artist interviews as a sideline for a few years. Generally, the audio files submitted by the interviewers would go straight to her, and after a week or two she would supply me with a literal transcription. Often, however, she would first give me her general impression of the interview after an initial listen, drawing my attention to its strengths and weaknesses. Her feedback became an essential tool in the editing process. On the other end of the spectrum, one of the contributors to the project was publicly accused of domestic violence. This led to a range of conversations with colleagues and collaborators about what to do. Could I still include the text in the anthology? Did it matter that the case was not before the courts? Does their guilt or innocence make a difference to my decision? Should the interview have a special preface? These are questions I had not expected to have to answer when embarking on the anthology project, and I have yet to decide how to proceed.

Betsy Sussler has said that all an interview aims for is “a revelation or two” (in Johnson 2005: 101). The interviews I commissioned did, on occasion, turn up such revelations. Jody Brand, asked why she gave up street photography, says: “It is extremely difficult to photograph people in the street in Johannesburg as a white person, when you are not a white person;” Mikhael Subotzky states: “I think the elephant in the room is that I feel like I have lost faith in photography;” Nelisiwe Xaba all but denies that she is a performance artist; Nicholas Hlobo speaks publicly about his stroke for the first time; Bogosi Sekhukhuni renounces Afrofuturism: “In present times it is really a kind of cultural imperialism;” and David Koloane describes feeling like a young boy when working with moving images. Paul Barolsky, the Vasari scholar mentioned in Chapter V, concludes his argument about art history’s fear of fiction with this question: “How does one tell the history of art, the many stories of art, in a lively, enduring way” (in Barriault et al. 2005: 35)? The above revelations suggest that artist interviews are one possible answer to this question.

Alongside the rise of the artist interview, a new type of book emerged: the interview anthology, what Manganyi called the ‘book of conversations.’ This format has a historical antecedent in Vasari’s *Lives*, in modern art criticism an early example is David Sylvester’s interviews with Francis Bacon, first published in 1975. In South Africa, Avril Herber published

Conversations, briefly discussed in Chapter I, in 1979. Many more anthologies have been published in the past twenty years.

Based on my reading of Christ, Manganyi, Hardy, Mancoba and Felski, a new anthology of interviews with South African artists would be a meaningful contribution to local art criticism. The interview's potential as 'wonderful criticism,' to use Christ's term, is matched by its double function as a primary source for future critics and historians. It is worth recalling Tuchman's claim that "[w]hen an artist interview is published for the first time, it's a work of art criticism. When it's reprinted thirty or forty years later, it's an art-historical document" (2008: 34). Moreover, interviews have the ability, and maybe even the duty, to entertain, which gives them a potentially much larger audience than traditional art criticism. This means that the proposed anthology could achieve two separate, but equally valuable, goals. It could serve as an introduction to the local scene for curators and art historians from elsewhere, and contribute to a local literature on art that is of interest to non-specialists.

ENDNOTES

¹ Let me emphasize that the artist interview *at its best* becomes art criticism. Much of the genre consists of interviews conceived as a lazy way to generate content and an effort of art publications to avoid paying contributing critics. In my role as a director at a contemporary art gallery, I have at times brainstormed with colleagues about an appropriate text for a forthcoming catalogue, and invariably someone would suggest that 'we can always just do an interview'. On occasion, that someone was I.

² An earlier version of the Sekoto biography was published in 1996 as *A Black Man Called Sekoto*.

³ "Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (Foucault 1976: 27).

⁴ In *Doubling the Point* David Atwell asks Coetzee about instances such as the Herber interview: "With few exceptions, the published interviews you have given have not been very successful. Many of them do not get beyond an attempt to clarify or agree on a basic set of assumptions about the exchange taking place (which makes them interesting too, but for different reasons)" (Coetzee 1992: 64).

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APPENDIX

Interview with Betsy Sussler, 31 July 2008

JB You have been a champion of the artist interview as a form of criticism, and you have mentioned that there is a real proliferation of artist interviews now. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a museum catalogue at the moment that does not have an interview with the artist in the book.

BS When *BOMB* started the critics voice held sway over the artist's voice, as if their thoughts about the work had to be interpreted for the world at large. It had only occurred to Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear at *Avalanche* to record the artists' own ideas. *BOMB* was saying that when an artist makes a work of art, they have a very particular thought process. It is like writing a poem, where an idea occurs, and the connections do not necessarily occur right away; but in conversation with the piece itself and with other artists revelations happen. Yet those revelations were not being brought to the fore.

BOMB has now been around for 27 years and there is not an institution in America that does not put the artist up on stage being interviewed by someone or other. We made that historically viable. There is a proliferation, and they do not appreciate the craft or the skill that goes into the genre. I am glad to say I think we still do the best ones.

JB I am curious about the mechanics of your publication. Are the interviews published in *BOMB* commissioned? Do you select two people to speak to each other or do people approach you?

BS Very seldom does a finished interview come into our hands and gets into the magazine, because the interviews we publish are very much developed according to our editorial specifications. We have 70 contributing editors—all practicing artists and writers. They bring us ideas, and we look for what is going to generate the best conversation, the one that is going to reveal the most, where the artist not only feels comfortable but challenged. Often it is about choosing another artist who already knows the work so that there isn't an enormous amount of research to do.

JB How does the published text relate to the actual event of the interview, the historical moment of words spoken?

BS It is a delicate balance. Sometimes the text gets overwritten and we have to bring them back to what they were. The way we have resolved this is that when people want to heavily rewrite their interviews, they do them via email in what I call the new epistolary form, so that no one is confused, it is already a written format. And that works out really well.

JB Do you have a preference between the different interview media? The effect and affect can be quite different whether one does an interview over email, or in person or over the phone.

BS I like the epistolary ones because they are so wonderfully dense without being impossible to get through. They can be so well considered and is no transference between the spoken word and the written page. And I equally like the spoken word ones because there is a transformation and that transformation is so exciting. There are some that are very much slice of life, and haven't been brought to what I consider the next stage of development, which is to let ideas grow during the process. Sometimes that is also fine; the interview becomes about language and the spoken word—they become more personality driven interviews rather than idea driven interviews.

JB Is there any one person responsible for the final edit?

BS The artist has the final say. It is their name, it is their voice. Of course I can have very strong opinions, which I give to them and they can take it or leave it. People used ask why we were giving the artist the last word, assuming it would lead them to whitewash. My response has always been that they are in conversation with another artist, they really are seeking the truth. One of the things about our interviews is that when you sit down and you do an audio tape, you know it is still an intimate experience and the artist is in a vulnerable position. That intimacy is where a lot of people find those revelations but they also say things that perhaps are not everyone's business nor should there be. There have been one or two occasions where it is been a whitewash and we have cancelled the interview.

JB You would rather cancel the interview than publish it without the artists' consent?

BS We do not publish interviews without the artists' consent. That is part of our mandate and is rooted in Liza and Willoughby's standard at *Avalanche*. Somebody had to take up the cause.

JB Is there a code for best practice; if you follow certain rules you get a good interview and if you do not follow them the interview will go nowhere?

BS You know there are very few rules. The most important one is to listen, which people rarely do. And the second one is to try to be honest and truthful and the third one is to delve deep into your soul, both the intellectual one and the emotional one, and try and express yourself in best way you can. But let me say this, we do not interview anyone. We interview people who have a really good story to tell because they are producing great work and they have really interesting ideas.

JB A few years ago you transferred your archives to the Columbia University library. What do you see as the significance of that raw material? Am I correct to assume that this archive includes first drafts and unedited interviews?

BS Our interviews are historical documents; getting the artists' ideas down during a particular period of time which I think is historical and it is for posterity. If you go to the Smithsonian they have thousands of stories documented. Not all of those stories are ones that the general public might want to read but a scholar or an artist might. All our transcripts, all the audio tapes and multiple drafts are now at Columbia. What you see is a transformation of what the artist was thinking about, how they wanted to represent themselves, how they thought about their work, how they think about their work and what they didn't want to include; which in many instances is very interesting but just not for public consumption.

JB But now that it is in the Columbia library would it possible theoretically for me to go there and sort of create an archaeology of a particular interview?

BS Yes.

JB Sara Anne Johnson, in her book *The Art Of The Author Interview*, quotes you as saying 'that what an interview ultimately strives for is a revelation or two'. In a way that is a very modest ambition.

BS I do not think revelation is modest. How often do you have revelations?

JB I have found myself doing interviews that do not seem to be going anywhere, and then all of a sudden the artist says one thing that is the nugget that makes the interview worthwhile.

BS Well you take that nugget and run with it. That is why I say when we do sit down interviews that we develop them, because sometimes the initial conversation is not enough—we really believe strongly in several drafts, what I call the Hans Hoffman push-pull; some ideas are pulled out, and others that are not going anywhere are pulled back, and off the page. I am a big proponent of going slowly and carefully because my idea is that making art is a lifetime activity. I do not do things quickly, I do not reflect on things that have happened yesterday. I can't. I need time. I need time to reflect and I do not like going through work as if it were commodities or voices as if they were a commodity. We like the slow in-depth way of working and that takes time and we are willing to give it that time, we take great pleasure in that because we are after transformation.