

diSONARE with Jarrett Earnest The Oral Side of Art History

Jarrett Earnest is the author of What It Means To Write About Art: Interviews with art critics. His long form interviews have appeared in The Brooklyn Rail, The Village Voice, The Los Angeles Review of Books, Art in America, Art Practical, and many other artist catalogues and publications. He coedited the volumes Tell Me Something Good: Artist Interviews from the Brooklyn Rail. Editors Lucía Hinojosa and Diego Gerard met with Earnest to discuss his notion of how the interview as a genre can be regarded as the oral side of art history.

Diego Gerard / diSONARE: One of the implied arguments in your book is that interviews and conversations offer an alternative in the way we talk about art criticism. What is so acutely poignant about interviews and conversations, what do we obtain from them that differs from other sorts of information, be it writing or art pieces themselves?

Jarrett Earnest: The subtext of an interview with an artist or a writer is that you want to get a sense of who they are as a person as opposed to looking at their work or reading about it. You want to have some fuller sense of who they are. Interviews play with this in a lot of ways. That's part of the tension in a lot of interviews, the way someone is trying to construct themselves or create a representation of themselves or their work through a particular view through language, and also dealing with ideas, projections, and fantasies of the person who is asking the questions and how they want to be perceived. All of this is playing out in real time in ways that move very subtly and sometimes very quickly. What I like about conversations and interviews is that as a medium, they can hold anything together, all kinds of different ideas, feelings, and contexts that are very personal and very abstract intellectually, they all sit together side by side. People often speak indirectly about themselves and their work, so that means interviews allow for long digressions or jokes that can move you around with the speed and flexibility that you can't get in any other form.

Lucía Hinojosa / diSONARE: I like what you mention about projections, because you're dealing with all these characters or identities of the person in front of you.

JE: Absolutely. There's some version of a character that exists in the world for every public person. That character may or may not have anything to do with whom that person is in real life or in a day-to-day basis. A big part of interviewing is to peel this away, even though you're not trying to get to the deepest truth about someone—I'm not sure that even exists—but what you *are* trying to do is get beyond whatever character exists in the world that runs interference between the artist and the public to try to understand the underlying motivations or intentions. I feel like there is a character in my book who is called Jarrett Earnest who is the interviewer, but it seems to me as much of a character as anything else, I don't necessarily regard him as *me*, and this character also changes a lot across the book depending on who he's talking to, because I'm really trying to engage with each person in a way that best suits their ideas, their history, and who they are.

LH: You also talk about a sort of *tactic* as to how to intervene with certain people and personalities. Tell us a little more about this tactic that you've developed.

JE: I think of most things in erotic terms, at least metaphorically. There's an aspect to interviews which is very much like going on a date with someone, a date in which you really want to take

them home. When you're talking to someone and you're connecting and listening to each other, you can come up with new ideas. You can move a conversation with an artist into a new place and a different aspect of their work that they might not usually talk about. Most people have a way of talking about their work, they have a kind of shtick, so it's a way to get them around the shtick, that means that you're really thinking in a tridimensional way about the space of the interview—and by space I mean the space between people as much as the setting. It's about thinking of what I, as interviewer, can bring to the table. Nobody is neutral, everyone comes with different baggage that will relate to another person differently. I'm very aware of who I am and what I look like when I'm talking to somebody, and it's different and modulated if I'm talking to an older straight woman, or if it's a gay man. I try to figure out the specificity of where everyone is coming from, to speak to them from that position and not rely in any generality or assumption that I have about them. You have to know that they're not just a type. More than anything, that's my tactic, to try to figure out as much as I can about the specificity of them that makes me curious. The key to doing an interview is actually being curious, wanting to know. When I read the work of any interviewee, I have questions for them that I just want to know—*Why do you think that? Where does that come from?*—Interviews are mostly about listening and being present and curious.

DG: You mention in your book that when conducting an interview, you “try to identify the things an artist strategically avoids talking about.” And you cite the case of Linda Montano interviewing Vito Acconci, setting off the interview with a rather uncomfortable question, which immediately leads Acconci to a rhetorical defensiveness. Can we think of interviews also as a sort of rhetorical assault? Hence a rhetorical defense?

JE: At times this is true. It really depends on what you want to get out of it. The thing that was very interesting to me about Linda Montano's book, which was a big inspiration to me, was the realization that when too many people do interviews, especially journalistic interviews that you read in magazines, they are way too polite and reverent, it becomes something like “let me tip-toe around asking you this very obsequious question so that you like me.” I think it's ok for people to not like you, especially when you're doing an interview with them. More than anything, I think that is one of my secret powers, not caring if someone doesn't like me. If that is something you're worried about when you're talking to someone then you're not fully concentrated on what they're saying, you're not concentrated on your own questions, and you're thinking of some other weird social dynamic which really isn't interesting or useful. Whether or not someone thinks you're stupid is not as important as whether or not you can get to some fantastic new understanding of where that person is coming from that then illuminates the work that they make, which is my goal when I do an interview. Linda Montano does come off as unlikable at times in those interviews because she is an artist with a job to do, and the job that she set for herself is figuring out how people think about all these really profound topics in relationship to performance art. She is not playing around. I spoke to her when I was finishing my book and she said that interviews for her were a matter of no nonsense—she would meet the people, ask them questions that were very direct, and would stop the interview as long as she had an answer that satisfied her. If you're doing it with that kind of speed, it makes sense to be blunt.

DG: What she's doing too, to some extent, is creating a space where the conditions are favorable to her to conduct these interviews. Is there a way to create an ambiance that really favors how to talk to somebody specifically?

JE: Everybody is different. When I give advice to people who are starting to do interviews, I really find myself giving the same advice to people who do anything, which is a dopey cliché: to be yourself. There's not one tactic that is going to work for everyone, a set of one-size-fits-all approach. My interview style can be very intense, it can be rough, it can be silly, but it's also very important to me that someone feels understood and that they know that I'm not out to get them but that I'm in it with them. All this is about trying to create a sense of trust, and another way of doing this is giving them the sense that you're not full of shit, showing them that you know something about who they are, you've given it a lot of research and thought and you're asking questions that they haven't been asked before. When I interview someone, I read all the other interviews they've ever done, and when you do that you notice that people get asked the same thing over and over again. When you find something new to ask, they generally appreciate it.

DG: This cumulative content in the form of conversations makes you regard interviews as the oral side of art criticism. Why is this oral aspect of art history so important?

JE: Conversation is the atmosphere in the hot-house that is culture and that makes art. In order for art to grow, it needs an environment. Conversations between artists and writers, artists and critics, critics and curators, is the dynamic ecology of making, looking, and thinking which is permeated by talking. My belief is that any moment within important human cultural achievement is the product of conversations between friends and enemies. What happens is that all that gets materialized through an object or a book or a piece of music then travels through time, but the atmosphere of language that helped generate it disappears, which is fine, except that you might also want to have access to some of that context of how artists were talking and thinking about their work. In general terms, what was important to people and the ways in which certain aspects created meaning for them.

I've treated interviews as oral history as an attempt to capture some of that richness that otherwise disappears and has to be retroactively reconstructed by a historian. History is an extremely malleable thing, it's not static, it's always shifting. It has been rewritten, understood and misunderstood. So the more access we have to what people who made culture thought about it, the more tools we have when we revise, expand and shift the histories that we tell in the future.

DG: With this in mind, would you affirm that an interview or a conversation is a genre in and of itself?

JE: It certainly could be understood this way. What I like about it is precisely how normal it is. In a way it's almost like the relationship of a porn-star to a normal person—everybody has sex all the time, but some people do it as a performance for other people, maybe they don't have better sex than normal people, but maybe it looks better in a certain way. There's an aspect to that in criticism: everybody has a critical impulse, they watch a film and they have a feeling or thought about it that is connected to another part of their lives. It's a normal, profoundly human response. But there's a way to cultivate and treat that in a more precious way and doing it for a bigger audience. Talking is like that too, interviews are your normal life but you've drawn a magic circle around it between you and another person for a certain amount of time, where you'll be the best listener you can be, the best talker you can be, the most engaged. There is something about interviews that seems like a very private performance that always has the underlying recognition that it will have a public future, but it also stays as a lived experience, despite the fact that what

goes forward into history and into the public space is a written text, which has a whole different set of questions about it.

LH: The private aspect of it is the time in which the interview exists, the magic circle you talk about becomes a performance that is encapsulated in that time frame, but when it's transcribed into text, does it remain true to that space that was temporarily created?

JE: This is something that I have thought about, the relationship of the written text to the life experience. When I interview someone I always give them the opportunity to approve the text, anything that they don't like they are allowed to alter. This is important because it gives people the freedom to articulate a thought that they're not quite sure about. The purpose is not to let them slip-up and send it to print. The text is a different thing. There is something about the lived experience which is so specific—intonation, body language, tone—that makes a raw, direct transcript not be very faithful to the truth of the experience, and because of that I edit the interviews, to try to make them say what my understanding of what the conversation was like; and also to make people sound smarter, because a direct transcription sounds stupid, and this has to do with the fact that we are not words on a page.

LH: Right, because another way interviews are done is through e-mails, written questions and answers, where people have a more distanced and calculated way of phrasing and responding.

JE: That is one reason why I don't like or do text based interviews. People censor themselves too much, and it's not about an exchange. What I like about the live, in-person back-and-forth is that it has a deeper texture to it, and you can push someone in a weird way, riff on stuff in ways that are impossible to reproduce through an e-mail exchange.

LH: You can't read the presence of a body in the same way through that exchange...

JE: Absolutely.

DG: You'd lose what you term the *tussling inter-subjectivity* in your book. But do you think successful interviews always result in this tussling?

JE: It's complicated. Most everything interesting results in that, engaging with painting results in that. But regarding the form of it in an interview, I like to show how I'm just a freaky person, and that I'm going to ask questions in a way that they wouldn't respond to someone else. And it's always honest to show the context in which the responses were delivered, *that* is the tussling. You cited the example of Linda Montano interviewing Vito Acconci, where he seems annoyed and aggressive in response to what she was doing to push him, so this inter-subjective exchange really gives you a sense of who he is and why he is talking like he is. The *tussling inter-subjectivity* means I'm no angel, I'm coming into the space of the interview with my own baggage, and they are responding to that on different levels, as I am to their baggage on different levels. I like capturing that in a very specific moment, rather than saying that the text is an immortal document of what the artist thought about their work for all time as if they were speaking in a vast, abstract auditorium to eternity. No. It was 2016, we were sitting together on an island and you were talking to me wearing cut-offs and a camo t-shirt, which means you might have different thoughts in that context than you would in a very different situation.