

Concept Scenario

Artists' Interviews

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT-SCENARIO

To make it possible for this method of interviewing artists to be used by others, a model has been developed which outlines a general structure for the interviews. The artist is first invited to speak as freely as they like about their working methods, their choice of materials and what they mean. Only later are questions relating to ageing, conservation and restoration addressed. This model presents the subjects of the interview and the preferred order. However, this model may be adapted to all kinds of interviews. The intention is for these goals, example questions and practical tips to be used to compose models which are tailor-made for the oeuvre of the artist being interviewed. The various subjects of the interview are described as 'interview stages'.

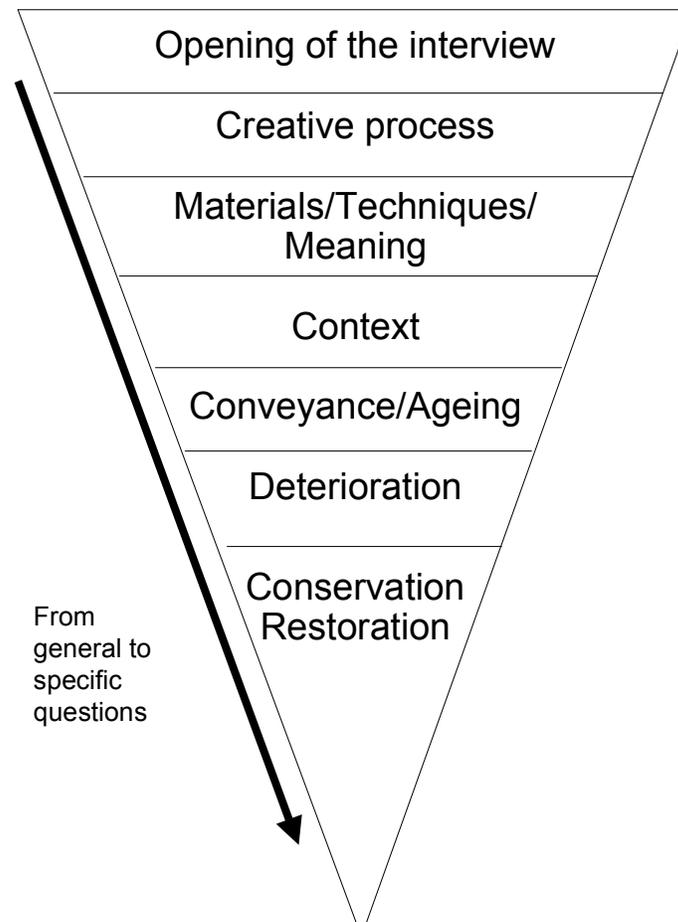
INTERVIEW STAGES

- A. INTRODUCTION
- B. OPENING QUESTIONS
- C. CREATIVE PROCESS
- D. MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES/MEANING
- E. CONTEXT
- F. CONVEYANCE/AGEING
- G. DETERIORATION
- H. CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION

Chronology:

From 'open' to 'closed' questions

Scenario



The triangular structure of the model indicates the course of the interview, which begins with open questions (in which the interviewees are free to answer the questions in their own way) and concludes with specific questions (in which the interviewees answer questions relating to specific examples).

In the first stages of the interview the artist is asked to talk as openly as possible about his or her working methods, use of materials and the meaning of the work. These subjects form the core of the interview. The artist's answers also form the foundations for the subsequent stages, in which conveyance, ageing and conservation are addressed. The model follows the 'life story' of the art work: the first stages of the interview focus entirely on the creation of the art work and the meaning ascribed to it by the artist. This process takes place in the confinement of the studio. At a certain point the work leaves the studio and becomes subjected to outside influences, such as time and the conditions in

which the work is exhibited, transported and conserved. In the following stages the questions are directed at these subjects. However, questions are posed as openly as possible so that a general impression may be formed of the artist's opinion, for instance, vis-à-vis the loss of meaning as a consequence of ageing materials in the object. However, increasingly more specific examples or situations will be discussed.

Only at the end of the interview will subjects like preservation, conservation and restoration be addressed. Assuming the artists answer all the questions in the earlier stages of the interview, a clear image will now emerge of the working methods and the material-technical significance of the oeuvre. This should enable questions about conservation to be answered 'simply' (in many instances the interviewers will be able to deduce the answer from the preceding information). The closer the interview comes to the tip of the triangle, the more specific and concrete the answers will become. There are no open questions at the tip of the triangle. These questions mainly have a control function.

Aim

- The aim of the interview is to allow artists to speak as freely as they can about their work. The model has therefore not been developed according to a strict list of questions, but has been organised in stages which provide a general indication of the subjects that will be raised. The emphasis is on the stages in which questions are put about working methods, the use of materials and techniques, and the meanings relevant to the artist's work as a whole.

Practical tips

- The model is an aid and not an aim in itself. Do not follow the categories too rigidly. By keeping the general themes in mind it will be possible to return to earlier stages at any point in the interview, even if the conversation goes off at unexpected tangents.

- Be mindful of the aim of the interview: to obtain an insight into the working methods, the materials and techniques, and their significance within the artist's oeuvre, with a view to conservation now and in the future. Answers to specific problems relating to specific objects are therefore less important than general statements on the basis of which guidelines for (future) conservation may be formulated.
- Do not resort to questions relating to preservation and conservation too readily and be clear that you will not primarily be asking direct questions on these subjects.
- Maintain the demeanour of a colleague, but do not lapse into a tête-à-tête with the artist.

- Speak for the benefit of the camera (remember the viewer is far less informed than you are)
- Try to persist with questioning if the artist becomes evasive.
- Do not resort to 'closed' questions too readily.
- Structure the time, preferably per interview stage. If necessary, take a clock so that everyone knows how much time is left during the interview.

A. INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW

During the introduction the interviewers explain the aim of the interview. They prepare the artist for the course of the interview, for which the model provides a basic structure.

Practical tips

- Explain how the model is structured so that it can be referred to during the interview. (For instance, if the interview digresses you can always say something like, 'We were talking about how you make your work. Let's talk about this a bit more before going on to the meaning of the materials.')
- Bear in mind that the viewer has less information than the interviewer who has prepared the conversation. At times, by appearing to be more 'naïve' than you actually are, you will be able to get the artists to be more explicit in their explanation of aspects that might otherwise be assumed to be common knowledge.
- At the end of the introduction the artist can be prepared for the first question (see below). This preparation is essential if the opening question is 'What do you see?'.

B. OPENING QUESTION

The first question immediately follows the introduction. This question largely determines the course of the interview. A number of variations are possible, which means that the choice is dependent on:

- the nature of the work,
- the place where the interview is taking place (e.g. the studio, in the presence of the work in which conservation problems have been identified; the studio, in the presence of recent work; elsewhere, where reproductions have to be referred to)
- the predicted response of the artist to the question.

Three options for the opening question:

- 1) In order to immediately direct the conversation towards the meaning of the materials, the interviewers may ask the artist about the use of materials and/or the most significant

content in the oeuvre as a whole. These kinds of questions will be addressed in greater detail at a later stage. For the time being, general statements are most important.

2) Artists may also be asked to describe how they read one of their own works (preferably one that is present in the studio where the interview is being held). This so-called 'What do you see?' question is aimed at evincing a spontaneous reaction, allowing the artist to describe what is -- literally or figuratively -- most striking about the work in question. In this way, the opening question, together with the model, may also set an 'agenda' for the interview. This reveals what subjects the artist considers to be important to the work.

These points can be returned to later in the interview. The work to be discussed should be selected with care and should preferably be physically present. This question may also be asked at another point in the interview.

3) Another possibility is to ask the artist about their most recent work (for instance, if little is known, ask whether they have had any exhibitions recently).

Aim

- The first question should give the artist the opportunity to adjust to the situation and to say whatever comes to mind. When enquiring about the content and/or meaning of the materials, the interviewer is trying to obtain a general statement.
- The 'What do you see?' question is aimed at understanding what the artist experiences in his or her own work. The answer could be a sensuous description of the work or an indication of the most important theme. The problem with this question is that it relates to a specific work and is a leading question, whereas the model moves from 'open' (general) to 'closed' (specific) questions. After this question, the conversation has to be opened up again.
- The question relating to recent work aims to a) obtain new information, because little is known about this work and b) to enable comparisons to be made with earlier work.

Types of questions

- During a certain period you often used iron. In what ways did this influence the meaning of the work? Why did you choose that material at the time, and why did you stop using it later on?
- When you look at this work, what do you see? Is what you describe the most important meaning of the work?
- The transition from the question 'What do you see?' to the creation process (stage C) could be: 'So, in this case you were working with a specific technical process. How does this relate to other works?'

- Could you say something about your recent work? (Explanation preferably to be given in relation to specific visual information.)
- The link from recent work to the next question could be: 'Did you work in this way in the past? In what way is it similar? In what way is it different?'

Practical tips

- Questions about the general meaning of the materials is only useful if one thinks that the artist is able or willing to make such a general statement. The subject of the meaning of the materials can be returned to in greater detail later on.
- It has become apparent that the 'What do you see?' question can only be put effectively if there is an atmosphere of trust between the artist and the interviewer. Consider beforehand when this question may most successfully be asked (it doesn't have to be at the beginning of the conversation).

C. CREATIVE PROCESS

The work used for the opening questions (stage B) may be used as a point of departure for questions relating to the creation process. However, at this stage the interview should be biased towards a general information. From the description of a single work, one should be able to pursue questions relating to the creation process in a more general sense.

'Types' of artists may be roughly divided into three categories:

- the artist who works directly with the materials
- the artist who develops the idea step by step
- the artist who develops the idea more or less entirely in his or her mind. *1

The creation process can be divided into the following phases:

- the development of the idea: does the artist makes sketches, maquettes, design drawings or does s/he have a mental picture which can be manifested without these 'aids'.
- the making of the work: the impact of the choice of materials and techniques on the work (questions may also be asked about the origins of a material or peculiar characteristics important to this work); how it was made (by the artist's own hand -- how important is the artist's signature, assistance, was it made by others, was it a readymade, a found object, and so on).

- the phase in which the artist decides the work is 'finished', after which it may be exhibited and sold (this includes what the artist regards as being essential to the work).

Aim

- As much information as possible must be gathered relating to the artist's working methods; follow step by step, and in as much detail as possible, how the work was made; acquire an understanding of the choices of material and/or technique; acquire an understanding of the elements that link or distinguish it from other works (of the same sort).

Types of Questions

- How does such a work come about?
- What is the relation between the sketch and the final work?
- Do you physically make the work yourself?
- Do you have your work made (or partially made) for you?
- I would like to return to the moment the sketch is made.
- When do you regard a work to be 'finished'?

Practical tips

- It seems that the artist enjoys speaking about the above points. The question is therefore not difficult to ask. One can stay with these points as long as necessary, because this forms the core of the interview.
- It transpires that it is consistently difficult to return to the basics of the creation process. A possible reason for this is that the artist is too aware of being interviewed on the subject of the decay and conservation of his or her work. An interview with a fellow artist may take a different course. Try to approach this stage with the demeanour of a fellow artist as much as possible.
- It is vital that this stage is thoroughly prepared so that questions can be pursued and comparisons between works (or groups of works) can be drawn.
- Continue to ask questions even if (and particularly if) the artist is inclined to avoid questions concerning the (conceptual) meaning of his work.
- If questions about the material and technical features of the work are too specific the interview may become bogged down in unnecessary detail (brand names, material definitions, etc.). This should be avoided.

D. MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES/MEANING

Questions on materials and techniques are closely linked to questions on the creation process (stage C). Questions of meaning may therefore also be combined with questions relating to the creation process, or may naturally issue from them. However, the question of the meaning of the materials and techniques must be put explicitly. Furthermore, the timing of this question is vital and is often dependent on whether the artist is inclined to address more profound levels of meaning in the work.

With regard to the meaning of materials and techniques, or the relation between the two, consider the following:

- the sensuous, formal meaning of the material (e.g. the colour red; high gloss)
- the symbolic meaning (e.g. gold for the divine; a found plastic bottle; a home-video)
- the conceptual meaning (e.g. the wind generated by a fan; the shape of a willow branch resulting from the growing process; an industrially produced cube).

Questions about the meaning of the materials require careful formulation. If the interview has gone well on the subject of the creation process an atmosphere of trust will often have developed which eases the transition to a more profound examination of the meaning.

Aim

- To make as explicit as possible the meaning of the materials and the techniques, and/or the relation between them, thereby producing an image of the artist's content decisions (material and technical).
- The aim is not simply to gather information about the nature of the meaning of the materials and/or techniques, but also to assess the relevance of the meaning of those materials.

Type of questions

- Why did you chose this kind of material for this group of works? (What does the material mean?)
- How important is the meaning of the material in relation to the overall meaning of your work?
- Is the most important meaning of the material the visual appearance or are there other qualities (such as origins, symbolic meaning, durability, evanescence)?
- What value do you attach to the original materials for the meaning of the work?

- What is the difference between the way you treat materials in work made for outdoors and indoors? What difference in content is generated by the different treatments?
- Should the material be (ir)replaceable in the event of ageing and/or decay? (This makes the transition to ageing.)

Practical tips

- If the artist is disinclined to release information, more specific questions may be asked in order to assess the limits of the meaning of the materials. For example: 'Is it important that you have worked on this object (or part of this object) yourself, or could it be replaced with a similar kind of object (or part)?' The emphasis here is therefore not the concrete question of whether to replace something or not; the question is geared more towards assessing the meaning of the material (in this case the artist's own handiwork).
- If put too directly, questions about meaning may be too confrontational for the artist and lead to the reply, 'I made the work, it's up to others to decide what it means.' The interviewer may then respond with, 'Indeed, which is why we are doing this interview. The conditions that you have created, in order to allow this freedom of interpretation, must also be maintained in the future.'
- If the artist reveals little about the meaning it is tempting to offer him or her an explanation 'borrowed' from the literature on the subject. This, of course, should not be done. Where necessary a control question may be put. For instance: 'From the literature on your work it is known that you prefer used, plastic objects because of the history embodied in the material. Is that true?'

E. CONTEXT

In the stages described above, the creation of the art work in the closed environment of the studio were discussed. In the stages that now follow, it is not the 'interior world' of the artist that is put under the spotlight, but the route the art work takes once it has left the studio. One of the switches between the inner and outer worlds is the context. The context refers to the influences that the artist is subjected to from his or her own environment: personal experience, education, the influences of contemporaries and peers working in similar styles, and the effect reactions to the work may have on the artist (for instance, from art criticism). Questions relating to context are placed at this stage of the interview because of this 'switch' between inner and outer worlds. However, if the course of the

interview demands otherwise, questions concerning context may be put at another time. A lot of information will have been gathered on the subject of the context during the preparation of the interview. The interview offers the opportunity to add to this information and to check its accuracy. Context plays a prominent part for some artists. In such cases, questions should not be put in passing, but should be given a clear position within the model.

Aim

- To acquire a clearer understanding of the external and autobiographical factors which influence the artist's oeuvre. This may also produce 'anecdotal' information which has influenced the creation process (for example, the origins and history of a certain material, object, image and so on)
- To shed new light on what is taken for granted in the literature.

Types of questions

- 'You were friends with the Cobra painters and exhibited a lot with them, yet you do not call yourself a Cobra artist. Why not? In what ways does your way of working differ from theirs?'
- 'You have just told us that you had the same (traditional) training as the artist X, and yet there is a huge difference in the way you approach your craft. How would you describe this difference? How did/does your education influence your work?'
- Using research into the literature the interviewer may ask control questions, such as: 'You are regarded as an artist whose choice of materials is based in their symbolic meanings. Is this correct?'

Practical tips

- Keep questions relating to context to hand throughout the interview, but only ask them when the moment arises, so that they do not disturb the flow of the conversation.

F. CONVEYANCE/AGEING

The moment the work leaves the studio others take on the responsibility of the artist. The work is transported, exhibited, installed, absorbed into a collection, stored in a depot and so on. All these things may have an effect on the function of the work: if it was initially part of the artist's private domain, it now acquires a public function. The questions asked at this stage in the model are linked to how the work should be *seen*, what the artist

considers to be important about how the art work is conveyed to the viewer. These questions can be relatively varied.

1) What does the artist want to convey through the visible exterior of the work (sensuous and aesthetic aspects). A key question is whether the specific visual qualities of the material (colour, texture, shininess or mattness, transparency or opacity, surface texture and so on) determine the meaning of the work (to an important extent), or whether the artist intends to create an illusion which the material is subordinate to.

2) 'Conveyance' also means the installation and exhibition of the work. It is sensible to be aware of any clear instructions and/or guidelines that may exist, the artist's view on how much freedom a curator may have when installing the work and, by extension, how the work should be exhibited in the future, when the artist is no longer around.

3) Another type of question relates to the value the artist attaches to the authenticity of the material. This is particularly important if he or she observes a discrepancy between the original meaning of the work and its current condition. However, concrete proposals for replacement or restoration are not the issue here, only general statements about the value of authentic material. This information can be referred back to when conservation and restoration are addressed later (stage H).

Aim

- Acquire an understanding of what the artist feels the work should convey to the viewer.
- This is linked to whether the artist feels that a change in the original, physical state of the work has led to a discrepancy in the meaning.
- Collect information about the installation and exhibition of the work.

Types of questions

- 'What do you think should be conveyed by the work? What do you want the viewer to see?'
- 'In your opinion, is there a disturbing discrepancy between the original condition and the current condition of the work?'
- 'Is this discrepancy the result of natural patina or other manifestations of ageing?'
- 'How would you describe the loss of meaning that has arisen through this discrepancy (ageing)?'
- 'Does ageing diminish the expressiveness of your work?'
- 'In your opinion, what is the acceptable limit of ageing?'
- 'May parts of the work be replaced or should they be restored?'
- 'Should the original surface be restored?'

- 'How would you describe the loss of meaning that is generated by this discrepancy?
- 'What measures do you take to conserve the external appearance as well as possible?'
- 'What are the conditions for installing the work?'
- 'Are you always present at the installation of the work or do you leave it to curators?'
- 'How should the work be installed later and by whom?'
- 'Do you keep to documented guidelines when installing the work?'

Practical tips

- Refer to photographic documentation (of different exhibitions) when asking about the installation of the work. The artist can then indicate which way of installing or exhibiting the work s/he prefers.

G. DETERIORATION AND DECAY

From now on the model moves towards more concrete questions relating to damage, decay and the problems of conservation and restoration. Issues that arose during the questions on materials, techniques and their meanings, can now be related to ageing and/or decay.

Once the artist has been interviewed in stages B to F it should, in principle, be possible for the interviewers to fill in the questions on damage and decay themselves. To elucidate this: the issue here is still whether the original meaning of the work as been altered by damage or decay. Concrete conservation and restoration proposals are not yet the issue at this stage.

Aim

- To find out the artist's opinion on the current condition of the work.
- Questions relating to decay will already have been partially addressed (stage F), or will have moved on to conservation and restoration issues (stage H). However, it is still important -- certainly during preparation -- to separate the questions as much as possible so that concrete and specific problems are not arrived at too quickly.
- The artist's attitude towards ageing, damage and decay is more important than his or her opinion on specific approaches to a problem.

Types of questions

- 'To what extent has the meaning of the work been altered by damage or decay?'
- 'Where is the border between ageing and (unacceptable) decay?'

- 'Do you then think your work should be destroyed?'
- 'When would you consider an art work to be a write-off?'
- 'Do you regard surface changes as decay?'

H. CONSERVATION/RESTORATION

The following step now is, of course, to inform the artist of concrete conservation problems and evidence of damage, and to ask his or her opinion on the subject. Although artists are not restorers, their opinions are taken into consideration when decisions are made regarding a specific conservation or restoration problem (see also: Decision-making model). If there are no obvious, concrete proposals for treatment, a fictitious case may be used to explain. In contrast to the open questions in the earlier stages of the interview, these questions are 'closed' and are honed to address specific situations.

Aim

Find out the artist's opinion on specific conservation and restoration problems and ask about any treatment that may already have been carried out. Both parts generate information important to (future) decision making.

Types of questions

- Do you still consider this work to be your work, despite the treatment it has received or the extensive damage?
- What do you think about the restoration that has been carried out on this work?
- How could it have been done better?
- If similar problems arise in the future, how should we deal with them, in your opinion?
- 'Control questions such as, 'Are we right in understanding you to mean that parts which may be replaced and parts which may not be replaced should be specified for every piece work?'
- What do you think of (photographic/video) documentation as a form of conservation for you work?
- Have you been directly involved in restoration in the past?
- Do you think you should always be consulted about restoration?

Practical tips

- An open question such as, 'How do you think your work should be conserved?', will probably not produce useable information at this stage, seeing as the artist is not usually experienced in restoration. However, a conservation model may be put forward as a control question.
- When asking the artist for his or her opinion, use as many photographs as possible of works that have conservation problems or works that have been restored .

Finally, at the end of the interview questions may be asked regarding the materials (such as brand names), the composition of the materials, a plan to indicate how the work should be installed, and so on.

FINALLY

During the pilot project Artists' Interviews it became apparent that a tension arises when an artist is questioned about his or her work with, on the one hand, the aim of acquiring a more profound understanding of the entire oeuvre, while on the other hand, wanting to acquire information specific to particular works. This tension is already present at a practical level. An obvious solution would be to use specific examples, although this often does not ease the transition to the next stage and statements which have a broader, more general value. However, the tension is greatest at the level of content. One could ask, for instance, how far the object-bound information may be ascribed the status of a 'general statement', on the basis of which it will be possible to make choices in the future. These problem areas appeared repeatedly during the pilot project.

As far as the second point is concerned -- the value one may ascribe to object-bound information -- it became apparent that the ten interviews that were held produced very valuable information. Furthermore, it is not unthinkable that a comparison of the facts relating to specific objects may, in the future, lead to statements that have a greater, broader value. This has been presented cautiously here and a more research is needed in this area. In another project it may be possible to analyse the interviews more thoroughly than was possible this time.

At the conclusion of the project it also became apparent that a single interview is limiting. In the future it may transpire that additional interviews will be necessary. On the basis of recent interviews, and any that may be carried out in the future, it will be possible to examine what limitations and possibilities need to be taken into account. Practical and theoretical research into the exchange of information generated by the interviews -- for instance, in a subsequent project -- could prove to be of great value.

Notes

1. When dividing artists into types one could refer to an example, for instance as given by Ernst van de Wetering in his article 'Leisde schilders achter de ezels' in *Geschildert tot Leyden Anno 1626*. Exhib.cat. Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden (1977), pp. 21-31. Three Leiden painters are here divided into the savage, spontaneous type, who works directly onto the canvas; the extremely careful type, who works with sketches and grids; and the third type, who doesn't begin a work until it has been complete thought through.