

Artists' Lives: The first thirty years

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An account of the first thirty years of National Life Stories oral history project, *Artists' Lives*, covering its origins, context, aims, organisation, technology and dissemination. The project is housed in the British Library.

Introduction

In June 2019 the 400th *Artists' Lives* oral history life story recording was catalogued. This on-going collection has grown gradually since the idea emerged in 1989. *Artists' Lives* is run by National Life Stories' (NLS) in association with Tate Britain and in close collaboration with the Henry Moore Institute. An independent charity, NLS is housed in the British Library Sound Archive, where the recordings are preserved and made available. To make its fieldwork recordings, NLS has to raise funds, competing with all the other good causes, many with immediately socially more compelling agendas than building what is effectively an educational resource. The digital life story recordings constituting *Artists' Lives* are invisible – audio rather than filmed – forming an unparalleled tapestry of vital research material and in their moment of creation are themselves living art history. As my colleague, and since April 2022 *Artists' Lives* Project Director, Hester Westley, has said they are 'reading for ears'.

The context for *Artists' Lives*

Fundamental to *Artists' Lives* is that it is run *not* within an art or academic institution. NLS was established in 1987 by sociologist and oral historian Paul Thompson and historian Asa Briggs with the aim of making life story audio recordings with as broad a range of the British population as feasible, to be made available to the widest possible public. *Artists' Lives* takes its place among diverse NLS projects such as *Food: From Source to Salespoint*, *An Oral History of the Post Office* and *An Oral History of British Science*. Fittingly for *Artists' Lives*, Paul sold a Henry Moore sculpture he had been left, donating the capital to the National Life Story Collection as it was first named. Importantly, NLS offers confidentiality to people making recordings, who can opt to close their contributions in whole or in part for their lifetimes or for a period they specify. This opens the door to frank discussions laid down for posterity on aspects that cannot be shared immediately, a treasure trove for the future. The majority of material is openly available, a great deal now accessible worldwide online on the British Library website.

Central to the experience of all oral history is *voice*, conveying so much about the speakers even before the meaning of their words is absorbed. Building on folklorist George Ewart Evans' pioneering recordings made in the 1950s in East Anglia, Thompson was one of the founders of the Oral History Journal in 1969 and subsequently the Oral History Society. Between 1970-1973 he and a team of interviewers made Britain's first national oral history interview study, *Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918*, leading to publications, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1975, republished, Routledge 1992) and *The Voice of the Past* (1978 Oxford Oral History series, fourth, revised, edition with Joanna Bornat 2018). Paul strongly influenced the development of the life story approach at the



Fig. 1. Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006) photographed at his home, Stonypath, near Edinburgh. In addition to Hamilton Finlay's *Artists' Lives* recording, the collection includes recordings with his former wife, Sue Swan, who helped create the early stages of his famous garden, Little Sparta, Ralph Irvine (1947-2022), his gardener, and artists Eileen Hogan (born 1946) and Janet Boulton (born 1936) both of whom painted at Little Sparta. Photo courtesy of Eileen Hogan.

heart of NLS' practice. This captures each person's knowledge of their forebears and memories of growing up and education, moving to adult life and the present, all the while documenting social history and the underlying assumptions of the period alongside the individual's journey. Art is not produced in a vacuum, and the life story permits *Artists' Lives* to range comprehensively beyond the so-called 'art world' in addition to exploring each career in detail.

Dr. Robert Perks joined NLS as Associate Director and under his leadership *Artists' Lives* came into being. The earliest NLS projects were *Living Memory of the Jewish Community* (active 1987-2000) and *City Lives*, exploring the world of Britain's financial capital in the 'square mile' of the City of London (running 1989-1993). I became a part-time, freelance interviewer on *City Lives* in 1989 and discovered I'd been making oral history life story recordings without ever having heard the term. I'd first bought a tape machine to preserve my grandfather's experiences in the trenches at Ypres in the First World War and had gone on to use it sometimes in relation to a column I wrote for *Art Monthly* about book art, and for a book about the theatre designer, Jocelyn Herbert. More exactly matching what I began to do with NLS were recordings I made with British children's authors and illustrators edited for reference books published in America, *Something About the Author*.

My background is not that of an art historian but by the time I encountered NLS I had been working with artists in a variety of ways. I had, through the Association of Art Historians' (now the Association for Art History) annual book fairs spent time with art historians, most well into their careers. The latter

were great company but – relative innocent that I was – I was shocked by their lack of interest in living artists and contemporary work, and by their apparent discounting of the views of artists themselves. The inference seemed to be that anybody visual was inarticulate (perhaps preferably deceased), needing an interpreter to speak for them, indeed, perhaps even to think for them. This has changed enormously during succeeding decades and maybe I was unlucky in those I met in the early 1980s in relation to this, but I became acutely aware of the gulf between the language and concerns of art historians and the encounters I was having with practitioners actually making art. They appeared to exist, unexpectedly, in completely different worlds. Oral history life stories were needed with artists, *not instead* of texts by art historians, critics, other writers and broadcasters but *in addition* to them, So, after the lifetime of the artist (as well as before), he or she should have some say in how they were represented.

It is greatly to Rob Perks' credit that he endorsed *Artists' Lives*. As well as a lack of welcome in 1989 from the art history contingent there was hostility from some oral historians, on the basis that artists were elitist and therefore not deserving attention. The origins of oral history are rightly rooted in the aim of giving a platform to those left out of established accounts – the many people who are not leaders or otherwise influential, whose stories for centuries have been overlooked. Ironically, taken to its extreme, the view that certain sections of society were too privileged to be offered oral history recordings created another kind of ghetto, restricting the reach of the discipline's effectiveness. There is value in oral testimony from representatives from the bottom to the top of society, including the many in between (which is where most artists exist, very few obtain the so-called elite status that is often misconceived to be their lot). To be truly democratic, oral history needs to be all encompassing.

Getting going

Mel Gooding was a fellow writer for *Art Monthly*, also not an art historian, and well aware of the principles of oral history not least through having grown up in Suffolk relishing the books of George Ewart Evans. When wondering how to establish *Artists' Lives*, I went to see Mel, who was immediately sympathetic. There were two urgent needs, to set up some form of advisory body and to raise funds (Paul Thompson's donation then covered the small administration outgoings of NLS but not the cost of recordings). Mel suggested we approach Alan Bowness who, as director of the Tate Gallery between 1980 and 1988, wanted to set up something similar but hadn't taken the idea forward. Alan's 'wish list' of potential interviewees from his Tate years was to form, with additions, the basis of the nominations we first worked from for *Artists' Lives*. Alan had been and was an art historian so my theory that no art historian of the time wanted to hear from the subjects of their studies began to be diluted.

Alan agreed to join the *Artists' Lives* Advisory Committee, which Mel went on to chair from its inaugural meeting until his death in 2021. Through Alan, we approached the Henry Moore Foundation for seed funding and were granted support for the first handful of recordings, beginning in April 1990. We were in time to invite Eileen Agar (1899-1991) and Michael Rothenstein (1908-1993) to take part, allowing us to reach back to the nineteenth century, not only through Agar's date of birth (just) but through their memories of the lives of their parents and art school tutors. In Michael's case this embraced episodes about Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Vincent van Gogh. Always rebellious, by the time Agar became a student at the Slade in 1925 she resisted firmly Professor Henry Tonks' admonition:

“Don't look at that French rubbish. It's . . . wrong, and it's not English painting”. He was also thinking of the Impressionists, people like Seurat, whom I think is a marvellous painter. . . . He was absolutely for British painting and trying to teach us very academically. . . . He said. . . “The Royal Academy and the British are the people who will lead art”. . . . We all swore that as soon as we were free of our parents. . . we'd go to France.’



Fig. 2. Caption: Eileen Agar (1899-1991), the first person to take part in *Artists' Lives*, was recorded between April and August 1990. Photo courtesy of Sandra Lousada.

The recordings

Agar did indeed go to France (enjoying a love affair with Paul Eluard along the way), long before it became common for British people to hop over to 'the Continent', decades prior to cheap air travel, years before Britain formally joined France in the European Economic Union in 1973 and well before the first rail was laid in the Channel Tunnel. Changes relating both to local and international travel and attitudes about it are among the details captured along the way in NLS oral history recordings. Alongside testimony in sister NLS projects, I suspect an analysis of the vocabulary and underlying assumptions in recordings



Fig. 3. John Kasmin confronts his younger self on the screen during *Artists' Lives: Speaking of the Kasmin Gallery*, a 2016-2018 display at Tate Britain using 260 *Artists' Lives* extracts alongside artworks in Tate's collection. In addition to Kasmin's recording extracts included those with artists, curators and art librarian Clive Phillpot. Photo courtesy of Cathy Courtney.

made either side of pivotal shifts –the rise of use of the internet, the 2008 economic crash, 9/11 or Brexit – would reveal interesting findings. Even in the short time since NLS' 1987 founding, life stories have captured far more than either interviewers or interviewees were aware at the time of speaking. The 2020 pandemic has cut a deep 'before and after' line.' In this sense, *Artists' Lives* recordings exist for comparison with all other NLS projects, their subject matter covering religion, politics, earnings, property, parenting, sex, health, love and many other shared topics.

In relation to France, the period of its dominance over the 'art world' is emphasised in one of the longest *Artists' Lives* recordings, with dealer John Kasmin (b 1934) who recounted that his 1960 interview for a job with the Marlborough gallery in Bond Street, London, was conducted in French, neither his first language nor that of gallery directors Harry Fischer and Gilbert Lloyd, who were German. The shift from French influence and the shock of the first shows in Britain of American abstract art at the Tate and Whitechapel galleries in the 1950s are alive in *Artists' Lives* in accounts of how opposing factions – those championing figuration and those entranced by abstraction – would cross the street to avoid one another. Richard Smith (1931-2016) expresses the impact of the days when art books were comparatively rare and colour supplements were unknown:

Smith: I was conscious of Jackson Pollock...I'd seen the photographs from *Life* [magazine] which were terrific.... about an inch and a half by two inches, you're looking at a Pollock, it doesn't give you too much information! [laughs].

Interviewer: Why do you think you responded to those little photographs?

Smith: Modern, new. Something I didn't know. I remember the exhibition very well, at the Tate. The Rothko really gave me a pain. I had to kind of bend over at the beauty of this work.

Kasmin's recording is one from a category within *Artists' Lives* informally known as 'art professionals.' Amongst others, this group includes four former Tate directors – Norman Reid, Bowness, Nicholas Serota and Penelope Curtis –



Fig. 4. Sculpture conservator Lyndsey Morgan carries out maintenance in the Water Gardens, Harlow, Essex, on *Boar* (1970) by Dame Elisabeth Frink. The sculpture was cleaned and a protective wax applied to improve its aesthetic appearance and to help protect it from weathering. Morgan's *Artists' Lives* recording is funded by the Gabo Trust and is ongoing. *Artists' Lives* includes a short recording with Frink. Photo courtesy of Bill Knight

curators, sculpture conservators, commercial dealers, art writers and art librarians. Readers of this journal may be glad to know that Arlis/UK and Ireland is itself discussed in recordings by Elizabeth Esteve-Coll and Clive Phillpot. Always there are difficult decisions to be made about priorities as there are never enough resources (neither funding nor staff) to include everyone. A balance is struck between prominent names – both artists and art professionals – who are certain to be researched in the future and those less well known for whom an NLS recording may prove to be the only detailed source of information. The Advisory Committee, now chaired by Lubaina Himid, plays an important role in selecting who will be chosen. Funding is continually on a knife-edge and, again, the Committee is immensely helpful in suggesting sources and championing NLS.

Sometimes very direct overlaps occur with other NLS projects. For instance, David Tindle's telling of painting John Sainsbury's portrait is extended by John's memories of it in *Food: From Source to Salespoint* and in the life story of former ballerina, Anya Sainsbury. Most interweavings occur within *Artists' Lives* itself. Paula Rego's (1935-2022) account of how she was viewed as a female Slade student in the 1950s is confirmed by the response of her former tutor Andrew Forge (1923-2002) when asked in 1995 for his memories of her when young. In his reply he dwells briefly on her charm before moving quickly on to talk about his own work and that of Paula's husband, the painter Victor Willing:

Interviewer to Rego: ...and when we talked before, about the student days, you said on the whole the women weren't expected to carry on as painters, and there was a rather patronising attitude to them. Did you think this group, if you went to dinner there, were you there as an equal, and as a painter?

Rego: I was sleeping fodder. I was there because I was attractive. ... I don't care if they, if they wanted to sleep with me. I mean it's embarrassing sometimes. I don't know what they thought about my painting anyway, because they never talked about it, you know.

Did they talk about each other's paintings?

Yes, they did, they did, they talked about each other's paintings a lot. Possibly not at dinner, but they were always together talking about what they were...and they painted each other.

Interviewer to Andrew Forge: And what was Paula like?

Forge: Paula was absolutely enchanting. When Victor Willing was first courting her...Victor used to come and use our house as his base camp....Some years later we went and stayed with them on the big estate that they had in Portugal. That was a wonderful summer, we stayed with them... and I painted out of doors and Victor painted indoors...

The listener *hears* Forge re-enacting what Paula remembered as he goes on to discuss the arguments he and Victor had about their respective painting methods. In Forge's defence, and as Paula witnesses in her testimony, it was he who first took Rego's work to a gallery to help her get a show and he was a great defender of her work. Arts schools and the enormous shifts in art education in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are well covered in *Artists' Lives* in recollections of former students, many of whom returned to teach.

Myriad themes link *Artists' Lives* recordings. Lynn Chadwick (1914-2003) recalls Max Ernst's words when Lynn won the International Prize for Sculpture at the 1956 Venice Biennale and received enormous attention:

Chadwick: One is accepted and then put on the shelf again very soon... Max Ernst and his wife, it was actually in Venice, I remember them saying to me 'You're having success now but it won't last.' ...That's how it is, you go in phases, you're pushed, you're number one and then you're dropped.

More recently Phyllida Barlow (born 1944) who represented Britain in Venice in 2017, and Sonia Boyce (born 1962), given the British pavilion in 2022, add accounts of their experiences of the Biennale as part of their life stories.



Fig. 5. Sonia Boyce, artist and Professor of Black Art and Design at the University of the Arts London. Sonia's *Artists' Lives* recording began in 2022 and is ongoing. Photo courtesy of Bill Knight.

From cassette to 'born digital'

Initial concerns that *Artists' Lives* was audio only were swiftly set aside. Because artists have to describe their work and its construction to communicate with the unknown future listener, they often find themselves putting into words aspects they have known subconsciously but never previously articulated. It is gold dust to hear a participant say, 'I never realised that myself until now.' And, of course, the way an artist sees their work – and that of others – is frequently a revelation.

In the first decades the recordings were made on cassette. Now they are 'born digital' and those created on tape have been digitised. Most *Artists' Lives* recordings are made in the speakers' studios or homes and a few in the British Library's sound proofed studio. During the pandemic, NLS devised a way of recording online using high quality podcasting software, Zencastr, and at the time of writing face to face recordings have resumed whilst some continue on Zencastr. The latter has made it possible to invite those based abroad, currently Jann Haworth (born 1942) in Utah, and Brian Wall (born 1931) in California.

Because each is individual it is almost misleading to speak of a typical recording. Oral history provides space for anecdote and diversion, securing much information that would otherwise be lost. Most NLS recordings are between 12-20 hours, created over a series of sessions, but many in *Artists' Lives* are considerably longer. Each session is summarised with time codes, creating a document for the British Library online catalogue that is word-searchable to locate sections of particular interest.

Online *Artists' Lives* recordings can be found at <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Art> and more will be added in 2023. *Voices of Art*, a series of essays with extracts from recordings, can be found at <https://www.bl.uk/voices-of-art>. General information about the project and a list of those who have taken part to date is at <https://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories-artists-lives>.

Artists' Lives exists through the generosity, energy, and commitment of a great many people, paid and voluntary, not least those interviewed and the interviewers, the NLS team and the funders to whom we are indebted. It enters 2023 under the stewardship of NLS Director, Mary Stewart, and *Artists' Lives* Project Director, Hester Westley, the perfect team for the next thirty years.

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