Working with people to make art: Oral history, artistic practice, and art education

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In recent years, some contemporary artists have used oral history methods as an integral part of their artistic practice. Oral history emerged in the United States as a distinct historical method with the establishment of the first organized oral history project in 1948 by Alan Nevin at Columbia University in New York. It gradually wrenched itself from its elitist origins of documenting stories of prominent white men to becoming a populist approach that draws attention to ordinary people's lives, perceptions, and experiences of an event (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Perks & Thomson, 1998). Based on interviews conducted over a short period of time, oral histories' primary contribution to the humanities is its concern for documenting the normally hidden histories and stories of marginalized social and cultural groups in our society. Oral history has gained acceptance as an invaluable means of understanding the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of an historical moment. As a form of cultural production that transforms personal stories into public stories, oral history adds to our understanding of historical and social relations in society.
In what follows, I focus on specific art works of four contemporary women artists; Peggy Diggs, Tomie Arai, Sheila De Brettville, and Jackie Brookner to illustrate the different ways they use oral history in their artistic practices. I choose to discuss these specific artists because their use of oral history methodologies, I argue, is sensitive to the relationship between researcher/artist and narrator and therefore is an empowering process. Drawing on this analysis, I outline the implications of using oral history in art education.

The term oral history in this paper is defined broadly. I borrow Renato Rosaldo’s (1980) definition; oral history “involves telling stories about stories people tell about themselves” (p. 89). The significance of oral history narratives is that they tell us more about meaning, feeling, desire, and perception in relation to particular events or experiences in contrast to official written history. Oral histories’ emphasis on meaning has a different credibility for those interested in alternative histories in comparison to other written historical documents. However, it is this credibility that has been the focus of heated debate among oral historians regarding validity and legitimacy, as the methods rely heavily on participant’s memory. Memory as we know is fluid and recall is often laced with fiction or myth. Memory is fallible and uncertain. Yet, as a “narrative of memory” (Perks & Thompson, 1998, p. x) with all its imperfections, oral history provides us with a sense of how people understand their relationship to the past. The act of remembering and reinterpreting the past for some oral historians is precisely the primary goal of their research projects as it enables individuals and social groups to be empowered (Cross & Barker, 1998; Kakar, 1998; Westman, 1998). I assert that in these projects the process is just as important as the final historical document. Compared to official history, some proponents of oral history claim that is inherently democratic because of its focus on ordinary people’s histories and its dialogic process of inquiry.

Generally excluded women’s perspectives and histories. They argue that collecting and documenting women’s understanding of their experiences expose the complexities of social processes since women’s life experiences differ from those of men. Furthermore, feminists indicate that this method is empowering for women, as they have a chance to tell their story. In the last decade, due to the reflexive turn in anthropology and post-colonial critiques of representation, this belief in the empowering nature of oral history has been questioned by feminists themselves. Recent work in feminist oral history foregrounds the often unequal power dynamics between researcher and narrator in this process, which previously had been heralded as democratic and equally empowering for both researcher and narrator.

At the onset it is important to emphasize that these artists do not adhere to the strict methodological procedures advocated by oral historians in order to ensure validity of their documents. Not being a historian, as Tomie Arai explains, allowed her to move beyond the issue of establishing validity and truth: “looking for some kind of truth was not the purpose of any of these interviews. And, so, in a sense a lot of the interviews themselves became for me like stories, or sort of narratives which were very close in some respects to fiction. And, that opened up a lot for me in terms of what art could look like or what possibilities could be” (personal interview with Arai, December 14, 1999). I acknowledge Grele’s (1998) criticism of a general lack of methodological rigor in some oral history projects and the subsequent problems of not ascribing to methodological rigor when doing oral history, however the works of these artists is worth examining as ethical questions are not necessarily resolved by methodological rigor. Claims of empowerment are still called into question when using oral history in art or historical research.
First, let me clarify the issue of empowerment in relation to doing oral history as it frames my discussion of these artist’s work. Oral history’s uniqueness stems from its method of inquiry, which requires face-to-face dialogue (McMahan & Rogers, 1994). This interactive methodology relies on two subjectivities: that of the researcher and that of the narrator. Attention to the ways the researcher’s stories are connected to the narrator’s stories in the oral history document is important but often remains hidden. Feminists and anthropologists (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Clifford, 1986; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fisher, 1986; Rosaldo, 1980; Visweswara, 1974) have in recent years revealed the power imbalances embedded in this process. Typically, the control the narrator may have over the interview process, which can be empowering as it validates her life experiences, ends once the interview is over. The researcher on her own most often executes the transcription, analysis, and final document based on the oral history narratives. Although oral history is heralded as an empowering and collaborative process due to the fact that it requires face-to-face dialogue, in reality the researcher more often shapes the final document. This methodological critique has forced us to examine and pay attention to the unequal power relations embedded in the research process.

Oral history is an act of exchange. Richard Fung (1993), an Asian Canadian cultural activist, provides a detailed map for understanding and evaluating any act of exchange between different cultural groups. Each act of exchange needs to be examined contextually in order to know if it is an empowering act of exchange for both the researcher and narrator or one of appropriation by the researcher. Appropriation is an unequal act of exchange between two different cultural groups in a society that is hierarchically structured. Therefore, it is a political issue. In order to access the nature of an act of exchange in terms of power relations, we need to consider a number of factors. I outline the factors as interrelated questions: how pervasive is the cultural misrepresentation of the particular group? What are the actual possibilities for the cultural group to represent themselves? To what degree has the culture of the narrator been commercialized? And lastly, what is the form of cultural production (Fung, 1993)? All these factors need to be considered when doing an oral history project in art to ensure that we are not appropriating the interviews of others for our own artistic purposes.

One approach that addresses the unequal power relations that are embedded in doing oral history is ongoing collaboration. Art educators Rita Irwin & Lorrie Miller (1997) advocate community-based oral history research, which by design involves the participation of community members from the very beginning of the research process and during the entire research process. As researchers Irwin and Miller explain:

We always come to our projects with our own experience. As we interpret the experience of others and carefully monitor our own reflexivity, we recognize that, at some level, our interpretations are still seen through our own lenses. However, if community members are integrally involved in the project, then a coming together of interpretations may be discussed openly. Ideally, all participants will learn from one another" (p. 16).

Drawing on the work of First Nation people whose educational philosophy centers on “community as the context of learning,” Irwin and Miller (1998) emphasize that collaboration not only values the community’s beliefs, but also more importantly views research and action as a symbiotic process. In other words, research needs to be directed towards some social action that “serves those who are directly affected by the process” (p. 14). Although research can never be
completely collaborative as ultimately the researcher shapes the discourse and final document, it can strive to minimize the exploitative aspects of the research process. So, what does it mean to work collaboratively with people to make art? Let us now turn to the ways in which some women artists have used oral history in an empowering manner.

**Shaping Visual Living Histories**

The work of these four women artists, Tomie Arai, Peggy Diggs, Sheila DeBretttville, and Jackie Brookner, in terms of form and content, is governed largely by process and is not solely art product oriented. Their processes, although specific to the nature of their artistic projects, share a few characteristics - their processes are collaborative; they use art to shift people’s consciousness about particular issues and events; they make visible issues facing marginalized communities in society; and they open dialogue regarding stories that are rendered invisible in everyday life. The interactive nature of the oral history method provides the inspiration and raw material for these artists’ creative process.

Tomie Arai’s creative process is inextricably linked with making connections with people in her community. As she states: “There are many different ways to work with people to make art. I received a New York State Council on the Arts grant for 1988-89. I used it to collect oral histories with Asian women and then make prints based on them. I invited a hundred Asian women to submit photos, recipes, and stories. I also utilized the archives in Chinatown, and I talked to community Scholars” (Weintraub, 1996, p. 106). Arai’s methodology, which combines interviews of women in her community with material evidence of their lives and archival research of the community, gestures to a more nuanced rendering of living history and cultural identity. The silkscreen series *Memory-in-Progress: A Mother-Daughter Oral History Project* (1988-89) produced during a residency at the Chinatown History Project draws on individual and collective memories in order to construct a living history. Arai conducted interviews with Asian-American mothers and daughters and created this series of prints loosely based on her interviews and family photographs provided by the mothers and daughters. For Arai the shaping of a visual living history is personal because she hopes to reclaim her own identity through this process. Arai recalls that while she was growing up, her parents (second generation Japanese-American) repressed and tried to negate their Japanese heritage in order to assimilate and minimize racial discrimination. “There was so much silence in my childhood. My parents did not speak. I wanted to retrieve them through talking to other Asian women” (Arai interviewed by Weintraub, 1996, p.106).

Attempting to articulate her own cultural identity through art and deliberately incorporating the oral history process, Tomai Arai’s work points to autobiography as a “site of memory” (Morrison, 1986).

Autobiography in current literary discourse is not simply a reflection of the self, but rather a way to understand history. As Janet Varner Gunn (1982) states:

> If self-realization must be gained from the ways the self is known by others, authorship of autobiography is always multiple. The story told through convention of the first person narrative is always a story which both discovers and creates the relation of self with the world in which it can appear to others, knowing itself only in that appearance or display” (p. 141).

Tomie Arai’s autobiographical narratives weaving myth, legend, and historical memory are also testimonies of community. The oral history process of sharing a personal experience which relies on memory and is part of a collective history can be empowering for both the storyteller and the listener. The effects of empowerment in Tomie Arai’s
collaborative process, where the narrators’ power is largely contained in the interview process and in sharing material evidence of their lives, are difficult to measure. However, the gesture to her own autobiography in her work resolves the imbalance in power relations between the Asian women she interviewed and herself as artist/researcher. These autobiographical narratives of both the women and the artist as a site of memory represent not just the self, but the cultural identities of Asian-Americans. Tomie Arai’s work exposes the relationship between her subjectivity and that of the women she interviews in her community. The public artworks of Peggy Diggs and Sheila de Bretteville involve shifting people’s consciousness regarding issues facing their community. Their methodology involves prolonged research in the community. Extensive personal conversations with various individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds in the community form the basis of their artwork and require community response and reaction in order for the artwork to be fully realized. The collaborative process of their work often uses oral history methodology to research, analyze, and document the concerns of the community.

Peggy Diggs’s Domestic Violence Milkcarton Project (1991-92) emerged from interviews conducted with many women who had faced domestic violence, including two women who were serving time in prison for assaulting their partners. During the course of this intensive investigation into domestic violence, Diggs not only interviewed women who were victims, but also psychologists, therapists, and health-care workers. She also read extensively on the subject. Realizing the magnitude of the problem, Diggs, as described by the art critic Patricia Phillips (1995), was “struck by the paradox of private isolation as a public condition” (p. 291). Sensitive to the issue women raised about maintaining secrecy about their abuse as a matter of survival, Diggs realized that traditional forms of art production such as exhibitions would not be a suitable venue for this project. She wanted to reach a larger public and yet maintain the women’s anonymity. Diggs decided to use the milk cartons as her canvas, thereby making visible in public that which is a private affair. She convinced the Tuscan Milk Company to allow her to put her artwork, on their milk cartons for a short period of time. The artworks combined text drawn from interviews she had conducted and images of common household objects such as a chair or house keys. On the bottom of the milk cartons, Diggs also provided the phone number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline for women. For example, the text on one of the milk cartons reads:

“What if

Someone came into your home, called you names, threw a chair, tore your clothes and knocked you down?

Now, what if that someone was your spouse or mate?”

This text was framed by the image of the chair caught mid-air after being flung across a room. By employing a guerrilla tactic of invading the private homes with a public message, Diggs provided an avenue for women to take charge of their own lives and seek help if they needed it. Despite the fact that the women’s participation in this project was minimal, that of providing the background research, this project I argue was empowering for women in two ways. First, through the process of sharing their personal stories with Diggs many of the women interviewed realized that they were not alone and that many other women also suffered silently. This realization helped the women she interviewed to begin their process of healing and recovery. Second, the women could take concrete action and change the circumstances of their lives, as Diggs’s provided the National Domestic Violence Hotline phone number on the milk cartons. The act of exchange between the
women interviewed and artist in this project is not framed by domination, as Diggins provided an avenue for the unspoken to be spoken.

The notion of appropriation was considered and acknowledged by Sheila de Bretteville, when she was asked in 1990 to present a proposal for a project called Little Tokyo, sponsored by the Community Redevelopment Agency in Los Angeles, California. This public art project involved making visible the past daily life on East First Street in Little Tokyo (L.A) before the process of gentrification began. de Bretteville asked the committee who were all Japanese-Americans, if it was appropriate for a non Japanese-American to depict the history of Little Tokyo. She was told that the Japanese-American community wanted to share the history of this area and make the knowledge available to those outside the community as well as those within the community. de Bretteville interviewed first, second and third generation Japanese-Americans about their memories of daily life on the streets of Little Tokyo and what these people wanted future generations to remember. de Bretteville states: “To limit the imposition of my interpretive framework on these subjects, I met with people from various sectors of the Japanese-American community and, by my choices of quotes, tried to reveal the contradictory multiple identities and the complex, generational differences among my informants” (1996, Art Lecture, SUNY, New Paltz). For her the sidewalks were the place to commemorate the lives of people and their buildings in Little Tokyo. “I had imagined all passersby drawn onto the east side of the street, attracted by a multi-colored concrete sidewalk, the glistening inlaid brass and stainless steel texts and images. Once there, each pedestrian could construct for themselves an understanding of this center of Los Angeles’ large and dispersed Japanese-American community” (de Bretteville, Art Lecture, SUNY, New Paltz).

Aware of the power differential as a white American, de Bretteville actively engaged in speaking with the Japanese-American community and also accommodated their request in reworking her design. Towards the conclusion of the project the committee got a bit nervous about rejecting the other Japanese-American finalists. The committee approached de Bretteville and asked if she could incorporate the designs of the other two Japanese-American finalists in her work. She indicated, “I do not have a problem including others’ work with mine” (1996, Art lecture, SUNY, New Paltz).

Jackie Brookner’s installation Of Earth and Cotton invites people to contemplate the relationship of their bodies to the environment and to social status as they listen to the experiences of cotton pickers in the south. During 1994-1996, she spoke to men and women who picked cotton by hand in the 1930’s and 1940’s in six different areas in the Cotton Belt. She says, “as they spoke about their memories and experiences, I modeled (not cast) portraits of their feet out of local soil. The portraits became the focal point of the installations... The portraits, made of many different colors and textures of soil, are metaphors for all the soils that were worked and the diversity of peoples who worked them.” (Brookner, 1997). The installation was comprised of feet made of soil against a backdrop of a video and slides of historical photographs of cotton pickers made during the 1930’s for the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration. Sensitive to issues of appropriation, she included a video of her interviewing the cotton pickers as she was making portraits of their feet in the installation. By doing so one could see and hear the cotton pickers tell their own story. The video showed the dynamics of the interview, as we saw and heard the questions Brookner asked of the people she met and their response to the questions.
Mishler (1986) argues convincingly that all interviews are jointly constructed. As he explains, “both questions and responses are formulated in, developed through, and shaped by the discourse between interviewers and respondents” (Mishler, 1986, p. 52). Therefore, understanding an interview largely depends on recognizing a few key features. For example, the cotton pickers based on their own understanding of her original questions reformulate Brookner’s questions. Another feature of Brookner’s piece is the ways the meaning regarding the cotton pickers experiences are shaped during the interview, with both Brookner and the cotton pickers reworking questions or moving the dialogue in particular ways. Clearly, for Brookner, oral history is a collaborative process. She speaks of her own experience of the process: “I have been very deeply moved by many of the people I have met. Somehow my sitting on the ground making the feet helped open up an intimacy between us. I did not anticipate this, and it has been a great privilege for me to be allowed into people’s lives so intimately, even if briefly. There have been moments I will never forget, and they have changed me” (Brookner, 1998).

**Thoughts on creating visual living histories in the art classroom**

The oral history method is slowly gaining popularity among middle and high school teachers as a powerful and engaging way to teach history and social studies (Lanman & Mahaffy, 1988; Sitton, Mahaffy & Davis, 1983). Increasingly, students around the country are encouraged to conduct oral histories in their families and communities. Incorporating the oral history method in the classroom is an effective way of connecting curriculum to community. Its benefits are multifold as illustrated by the Foxfire Project initiated at a secondary school in the Southern Appalachian region (Wigginton, 1998) and the oral history project in Fox Primary School in London, England (Ross, 1998). Foremost, it brings history home by linking the world of the textbook and classroom with the face-to-face social world of the student’s home community” (Dunaway & Baum, 1996, p. 11). The oral history approach by connecting history to student’s lives promotes a more nuanced understanding of history, community and culture. Through active participation in their communities students are motivated to learn and in the process they develop intellectual, social, comprehension and verbal skills. It also provides an avenue for ordinary people in the student’s community to tell their life stories and thereby construct a more complex understanding of history and culture. Students involved in oral history projects can learn about historical validity, including the difference between fact and opinion. The process of selecting and shifting through data collected (interviews) and checking other historical records for validity and accuracy in the stories along with the creation of their narrative records provides an opportunity to understand the notion of history as a social construct. Students learn to listen, talk and question while conducting interviews and develop the social skills of interaction, cooperation, and empathy (Ross, 1998). Elliot Wigginton (1998), a high school teacher and founder of the Foxfire Magazine which grew out of his English curriculum says: “we found that there were other values that came from this experiences. They did tend to be memorable for the students for whom high school was not a particularly memorable experience in a positive sense” (p. 20). Besides learning firsthand about history and issues of validity and reliability, students involved in the Foxfire Project developed close friendships with older people in their community. The initial barriers between the older and younger generation were broken and students developed a “kind of respect.... For the strength and resilience that humans have” (Wigginton, 1998, p. 212).

Cynthia Cohen (1999) corroborates the importance of using oral history as an integral part of education, based on her experience of
designing an intergenerational Cambridge Women's History Quilt project. In this art project young girls and women interviewed each other and documented their own lives by creating a quilt as part of local history. She states: "oral history projects provide opportunities for children to acquire the skills and sensibilities they need for intercultural competence. They learn how to interact respectfully with others, how to learn from others, and how to listen" (Cohen, 1999, p.3).

Clearly, introducing the oral history process as an integral part of an art curriculum provides all the benefits discussed above in relation to the history and social studies curriculum. Specifically, oral histories emphasis on process provides an avenue for an important shift in art education to occur. The perception and, for the most part, the reality in art classes across the country is that art projects have to be product oriented. For the artists discussed in this paper and other community-based artists the process is as important as the final art work and in fact is the impetus for doing this kind of artwork. Furthermore, including research as part of the creative process challenges the mainstream notion of the lone artist waiting for a moment of inspiration to do his/her work. This notion is often implicitly perpetuated in elementary and secondary art classes. The idea that artists may spend days researching their subject before beginning their projects is largely absent in most art curriculum and art teaching practices.

Art teachers using oral history in their art projects, however, need to examine the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the ways power operates in this process. Power dynamics in the oral history process need to be considered on an individual basis. For instance, the power relations that exist when interviewing members of the artist’s family and community are vastly different from interviewing and telling the story of a culture that is different. Despite the variety of ways in which power operates in oral history, the method of doing oral history requires us to focus on the connection between the stories told by those we interview and our stories in the final artworks we create. This acknowledgment of the connection between the two stories can be done in many different ways, as each of the artists described above has shown. One way is to acknowledge the presence of the artist/researcher’s voice and views in shaping the interview, especially when the work includes people from a cultural group other than one’s own. Jackie Brookner, for instance, projects the video of her interviews with the cotton pickers in her final art work. The audience views her work in the context of the interviews. Another way, as illustrated by Tomie Arai, is incorporating not only the stories, but also material objects from the interviewers’ lives in the art.

When using oral history in art, it is crucial however, to respect and honor those interviewed, by either including them in the final art work in some way or allowing the interviews to dictate the shape and form of the final artwork, as Peggy Diggins does in the Domestic Milkcarton Project. The choice of medium for these artists is not arbitrary and in fact underscores the respectful collaboration they foster with the people they interview in their projects. In a recent interview, Tomie Arai explained that her choice of working with silk screen printing was based on honoring mutual respect and collaboration:

"(D)uring the course of their conversations with me they would share photographs with me. I felt that the process (silk screen printing was loose enough so that I was able to incorporate the images that they liked as well as the images that I might have preferred. I was able to create prints in multiples, so that I could give them the artwork, so it was a really a sharing process" (personal interview, December 14, 1999).
Working collaboratively is an essential component if the experience is to be empowering for both artist/narrator and those interviewed.

This rich interweaving of oral history research and aesthetic practices opens up possibilities for not only coming to understand varied expressions of history and culture as a researcher/artist, but also for participating in the transformation of historical and cultural knowledge through active participation with issues relevant to the student's communities. By working in the margins of cultural knowledge these contemporary art practices which use oral history methods invite both students and art teachers to struggle with complex and contradictory visions of history, culture and community. The power of using the oral history method lies in the ways we art educators use it to challenge dominant ways of knowing.

References


