



THEY:LIVE

STUDENT LIVES REVEALED
THROUGH CONTEXT-BASED
ART PRACTICES

ORAL HISTORY METHOD – TIPS AND TRICKS

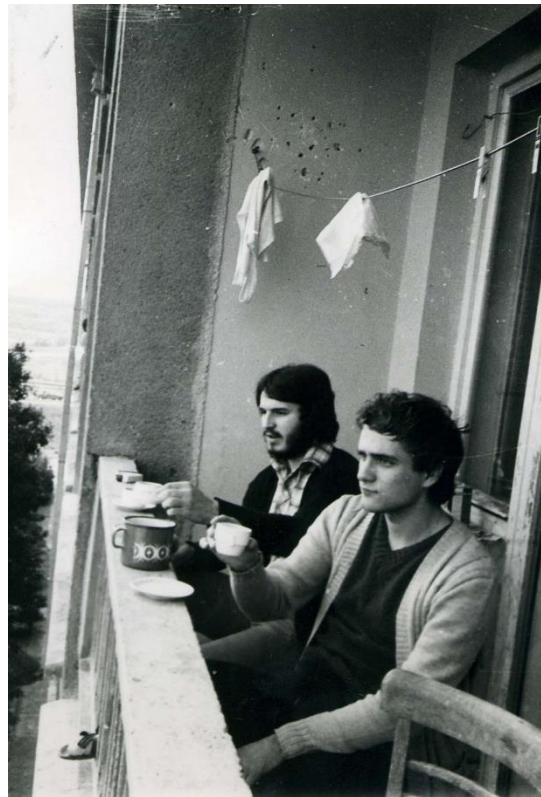
THEY LIVE: student lives revealed through context-based art practices

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"They: Live" project explores the student life from the end of World War 2 to present day in the context of everyday-life in student campuses, students' cultural habits and their free time, interpersonal and gender relations, as well as their social and political engagement. The aim of the project is to encourage student population to take part in understanding and co-creation of contemporary art, by means of using archive materials and taking part in participatory art activities during residential stays of artists in student campuses. The project results will be used as guidelines for managers of cultural institutions and art galleries, curators and artists, for the purpose of further improvement of innovative approaches to development of young audience.



From Mirko Konjikušić photo album, Student City, Belgrade, 1974.

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This handout is intended as an aid in planning and implementing the part of "They: Live, student lives revealed through context-based art practices" project related to the use of the method of recording oral histories. The basic idea behind this document is to make it clear, concise and easy to use, and to answer the basic questions: What is the method of recording oral history? How is it used? What is important to us in preparation and implementation of an interview and what should we pay attention to after the interview process?

„Where no history is readily at hand, it will be created.“

Paul Thompson

Oral history involves interviewing a person or a group of people to get an inside perspective into what it was like to live in a particular time or what it is like to live as a member of a particular group within the society. This method is extremely useful when we seek to discover more about groups, historical events/periods, or problems that have previously been insufficiently (or not at all) documented and supported by written materials. In that sense, we can talk about oral history as an approach that reaches those who are marginalized, discriminated against, ignored or under-privileged.

Although there is a constant tension between those who are in favor of using strictly verified and acknowledged historical sources, and those who advocate for a specific, intrinsic value of oral history approach, it is important to underline here that *„Written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive.“*

As Paul Thompson demonstrated in his seminal book *„The Voice of the Past“*: *„The use of oral history interviews as a source by professional historians is long-standing and perfectly compatible with scholarly standards.“*

Allesandro Portelli argues that what makes oral history different is: orality, narrative form, subjectivity, the “different credibility“ of memory, relationship between an interviewer and an interviewee.

All of the above aspects should be considered strengths, rather than weaknesses; a resource, rather than a problem.

“The documents of oral history are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and interviewees are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony.“

There are different approaches to oral history:

- Personal narrative - stories that individuals tell about their experience, observations, testimonies
- Life history
- Topic area - multiple individuals interviewed around one particular issue

Sequence of Oral History Research

1. Formulate a central question or issue.
2. Plan a project. Consider such things as end-products, budget, publicity, evaluation, personnel, equipment, and time frames.
3. Conduct background research.
4. Conduct an interview.
5. Process interviews.
6. Evaluate research and interviews and cycle back to step 1 or go on to step 7.
7. Organize and present results.
8. Store materials archivally.

Some of the things that should be kept in mind when approaching the method of recording oral histories:

- Oral history is an interactive, inter-subjective and creative process.
- Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor.
- Oral history tells us less about events than about their meaning.
- Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.
- There is a complex relationship between the written and the spoken.
- Words are not the only bearers of meaning, what also matters is the tone, volume, rhythm, body language, etc. They reveal the narrator's emotions, their participation in the story, the way the story affected them.
- Ethics – the way we use (or abuse) stories that belong to other people.

Questions to be answered by ourselves before we approach the interviewing process:

- How typical are the personal experiences of those who you decided to interview?
- What is the optimal number of persons that you would like to interview within the project?
- What kind of preparation do you need before the interviews? How much do you know about the issue/event/period that you are exploring?
- What kind of equipment do you need? How familiar are you with using the equipment?
- What is the motivation of your interviewees to take part in this project?
- What kind of power relations exist between you and your interlocutors?

Before the interview check that:

- You have all documentation prepared in advance
- Your technical equipment works well (there is enough space for new files; batteries are full and you have spare ones)
- Your choice of place and time for the interview is appropriate (a quiet place where both your interlocutor and you feel comfortable and without distractions)
- You have your questions printed with you and positioned in a way that does not distract either you or your interlocutor.
- You neutralized background noise.
- You invited the interlocutor to bring some significant photos and/or memorabilia with him/her.

During the interview make sure that:

- You allow silence. Do not move on too quickly just because there is a bit of a pause.
- You watch for the signs of fatigue and that you can follow the emotional state of the interviewee, as well as the level of energy during the conversation.
- You treat the person with respect. Do not let your assumptions, beliefs or prejudice affect the interview.

- You ask open questions and one question at a time.
- You start with less probing questions. Ask more probing questions later in the interview.
- You can cover all the important points within a reasonable amount of time.
- Your questionnaire serves you, not being an aggravating factor.

After the interview make sure that:

- You archive properly. You should label and store your files immediately after the interview is done. Signed forms and accompanying documentation should also be stored carefully and in a secured location.
- You make field notes about the interview (some kind of research journal). This is an opportunity for you to put all of your reflections, impressions and dilemmas on paper. It should serve your personal purpose, but later it can become a part of the project archive (but only with your consent). The research journal has an open form, it can be very brief, almost “bullets-style“, or closer to the traditional style of a descriptive diary. It is really up to one’s personal style, but what is important is that it should be an asset, not a nuisance!
- You make the right decision about possible continuation of the interviewing process. Think carefully about the possibility of an extra interview, if there is a feeling that there are some important things left unspoken and there is still a chance for them to be told. BUT – do not push too hard!
- You transcribe the interviews correctly and accurately. No interpretation or „translation“ of somebody’s words are allowed. The recommendation would be to have a joint agreement for the entire project about the way you approach transcription. The best option is to have a full transcript, which will include all non-verbal signals expressed during the interview (breaks, periods of silence, stammering, sighs, muttering, etc.). Include and note non-verbal signs with square brackets []. Examples: [chuckles], [chuckling], [laughs], [laughter]. Do not capitalize. If non-verbal sounds occur at the end of a sentence, place the word in brackets after the final punctuation. Example: „*[Deep breath]... I don’t like to go back to that time, it was difficult for all of us [period of silence]... Can we proceed with some questions?*“.

- If you keep your documentation orderly and signed, the authorization for the transcript is NOT necessary, although it is common practice to return the transcript to the interviewee for editing. They may make changes or corrections to dates, names or places, especially of words you may be unfamiliar with.
- You do your analysis and writing, and based on that, you do necessary adjustments to your research process.

Questions to pose after the interview:

- How did the interlocutor react? Was he/she comfortable with the setting/equipment/place and time for the interview?
- What kind of questions worked well? Not so well?
- Who controlled the interview? How?
- How did you feel while interviewing?
- How did your respondent feel while being interviewed?
- Would it be useful and possible to return for another interview?
- What would you do the same next time? What would you do differently?

ADDITIONAL TIPS AND TRICKS

- Make your own checklist of things you must remember to do before, during, and after the interview. Make it as detailed as possible, in the “check-the-box” form.
- Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it. This is not a private conversation. Take time to explain it carefully. You can have a preliminary conversation on this, so that you can make sure that the interlocutor is well-informed before the interview.
- Usually ask questions open enough to get "essay-type" of answers, unless you look for specific, short-answer "facts".
- Be aware of and sensitive to the psychological forces at work during the interview, both on your part and the part of the interviewee.

- Be aware that the rhythm and velocity of the interview depend on many different factors, including the psychological one. Dwelling on an episode may be a way of stressing its importance, but also a strategy for distracting attention from other, more delicate points.
- After the interview, make field notes about the interview.
- Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee, even if the topics are not on your interview guide sheet.
- Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and you need to know more. Or you might say: "I don't understand. Could you explain that in more detail?"
- Ask for definitions and explanations of words that the interviewee uses and that have critical meaning for the interview.
- Wrap up the interview with a lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.
- Copy each interview file. Store the original in a separate place and use only the duplicate.

Life History Forms/Demographic form

The life history form can contain very little or a great deal, depending on the project's purposes. Personal data are very useful and particularly recommended if the interview is a family history project or if interviews are to be archived for future use.

Release and Recording Consent Forms

Release forms can become rather full of legal-sounding language, but most oral historians manage to find a form with which they are comfortable. Release forms make it clear to the interviewee, without the need to ask questions, how the interviews will be used, minimizing the chances for misunderstanding.

DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Name of the project:

Name of the organization/University:

Time range of the project:

Date of the interview: _____

Interviewer: _____

Full name of the interviewee: _____

Date of birth: _____

Sex: _____

Place of birth, country: _____

Place of current residence: _____

Level of education: _____

Professional background: _____

Current occupation: _____

University and faculty attended: _____

Period of study: _____

Place, date:

Hereby I confirm that I agree that the above data should be part of:

- the archive of the project "They: Live, student lives revealed through context-based art practices";
- the digital collaborative online platform www.topothek.at/en/;
- the website of the project www.theylive.com and social networks connected to the project;

Interviewee's signature: _____

CONSENT TO RECORDING AND PUBLISHING

Prior to the recording I, the undersigned, agree to the recording and publishing of the interview for the purposes of "They: Live, student lives revealed through context-based art practices" project, conducted by XXXXXXXX.

I undertake to select one of the options proposed by XXXXXXXX after the recording of the interview, which relates to the degree of confidentiality of my testimony.

Your signature on this consent means that you have read and understood it and that you accept the stated conditions.

Name and family name of the interviewee:

Signature: _____

Place and date:

Address:

Mobile phone number:

Full name of the interviewer: _____

Interviewer's signature: _____

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATION IN ART RESEARCH

Prior to the recording I, the undersigned, agree that my interview may be used in a research process during Artist in Residencies programs on campuses, within the program "They: Live, student lives revealed through context-based art practices", for artists' purposes.

I undertake to select one of the options proposed by XXXXXXXX after the recording of the interview, which relates to the degree of confidentiality of my testimony.

Your signature on this consent means that you have read and understood it and that you accept the stated conditions.

Name and family name of the interviewee:

Signature: _____

Place and date:

Address:

Mobile phone number:

Full name of the interviewer: _____

Interviewer's signature: _____

EXAMPLE OF A BASIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name? Where were you born and when? Where did you grow-up?
Tell me something about your family and the history of your family.

What was your schooling like? What do you remember from your elementary and high school period?

Where did you live at that time?

How did you decide to study (*name of the course*)? Was that decision influenced by your family or some other factors?

Did your family's previous experience influence your motivation to study that?

When was that?

What were your expectations from student life?

Do you remember the exact moment when you "reached" the University? What did it look like to you? Do you remember your first days at the University?

Can you describe the building, the dorm, the general atmosphere?

What did your regular days look like? What were your responsibilities, interests?

What did the students talk about? How did you feel there, did you fit in?

Can you tell us about the cultural life at that time? What were you interested in (concerts, exhibitions, public events of different kind etc.)

Could you recollect some specific experiences, which made significant impression on you back in those days?

Can you recollect some extraordinary events from those days? Protests, demonstrations, uprisings?

What was the hardest part for you?

Did you have a chance to be active in these events? In what way?

What do you think about the student standard at that time? What did you eat, wear, what was the quality of life?

Could you notice any class division? How were they manifested?

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What did you do for living at that time?

How would you describe gender relations? Was that a topic of conversation at all?

What do you think about that period now?

How did this student experience influence your life in general?

Is there anything else that you would like to mention? Something that remained uncovered by this interview?

Further readings and sources:

Oral History Association - Web Guides to Doing Oral History

<https://www.oralhistory.org/web-guides-to-doing-oral-history/>

Do History - Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History

http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

Berkley Library - Oral History Tips

<https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/bancroft-library/oral-history-center/oral-history-tips>

Smithsonian Institution Archives - How to Do Oral History

<https://siarchives.si.edu/history/how-do-oral-history>

CroMe, Croatian Memories, Unveiling Personal Memories on War and Detention

<http://www.osobnasjecanja.hr/en/video-archive/eva-akerman/>

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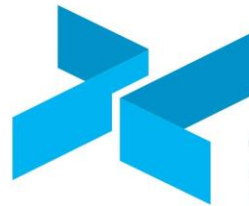
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Rey Juan Carlos



University of Rijeka
Academy of
Applied Arts



Universität der Künste Berlin
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