

# Both sides of the microphone

Clive Phillpot

As you will be aware, the theme of the Association for Art History (AAH) session at which this paper was presented was 'The Interview', specifically 'The Artist Interview'.<sup>1</sup> My paper includes references to many of the interviews that I have done, or undergone, generally in chronological order. The occasions for these interviews were very diverse, as is their content. Similarly, the characteristics of the artists interviewed are wide-ranging. (fig. 1)



Figure 1 Gustav Metzger making a recording in the studios of Resonance FM, 16 July 2010.

I hope that this selection will illuminate different purposes and different contexts for the generation of interviews, as well as the different set-ups for the interviews, whether in a soundproof booth, in a café, over the telephone, or via email, etc. The style of each interview varies. Sometimes the interviewer is like a reporter, sometimes like a detective, sometimes even a drinking buddy. But most of the interviews are more scientific, perhaps, in search of facts, opinions and stories, or in search of clarification.

I would like to precede this narrative with a reminder that interviewing is not such a specialist subject. We all engage in interviewing. We are interviewed for

<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the AAH conference as an audio recording with PowerPoint slides of the illustrations. This written version is the script for the recording session.

jobs, for places on courses, for witness accounts. And, in turn, we interview potential employees, possible contractors. So, what I refer to here might make you aware of both the diversity of possible subjects, as well as diverse approaches to capturing their experiences.

One of the first interviews in which I was involved was in 1967 when I was a student at library school, for a BBC Radio 3 programme on library science as a career.<sup>2</sup> I mention this event because it gave me my first lesson about 'the interview'. I was one of maybe four or five people whose interviews were included in the programme. First at the microphone was the principal of the library school I was attending. I liked this man and appreciated his achievements, but my regard for him was shaken when I listened to him in the recording booth. What I heard was: 'Our students have – um – come – um – from all over the world – um – and – er – over the years – um – have helped to establish – um – our reputation – er – for excellence.' I had not expected him to exhibit such nervousness. The equanimity of the interviewee is therefore of great importance to the success of the interview.

Let me now skip a decade, and one or two other interviews, in order to report on the results of my positive 1977 response to an invitation to apply for a position at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. After I had registered my interest in the position, I was asked if I could meet the director of the museum when he was next in London. His name was Richard Oldenburg, and he was the brother of the artist Claes Oldenburg. When we did finally meet, he suggested that we eat at the Mayfair hotel where he was staying. This sounded good to me, and we walked over to the building. When we got to the entrance a bow-tied doorman greeted us and immediately said that because I was wearing a roll-neck sweater I could not eat at their restaurant! Fortunately, Dick Oldenburg was not fazed and took me over to a pizza restaurant nearby, so that we had a much more informal meal and conversation. Needless to say, I was worried about such a start, even though I learned something from this hiccup, but if anything the encounter was simplified by changing the game. I was invited to New York a few weeks later. When I arrived in New York I realised that my informal meeting with the director was only the first of my interviews for the position, for I was presented with a whole week of interviews once I was at the museum. I lost count of how many people interviewed me or that I had conversed with. Ultimately, however, I was offered the job when I returned home. After settling in New York a few months later and having become acquainted with the workings of the library and the museum, I quickly became involved in extra-mural activities, in particular those involving publishing. So much so that I was soon invited to join the boards of two alternative spaces: Printed Matter Bookstore and Franklin Furnace Archive.

These involvements soon led to such projects as curating the first installment of a four-part exhibition at Franklin Furnace in 1980, entitled *The Page as Alternative Space*. This was history as demonstrated through the accompanying publications. My territory was publications that accompanied the emergence of Dada and Surrealism, and other contemporaneous movements.

<sup>2</sup> BBC Radio 3, 'Horizons: Careers in Librarianship', 6.40pm, 28 April 1967.

The show opened in October 1980, and soon after I got a phone call from John Russell, one of the *New York Times* art critics, an Englishman who had previously written for the London *Sunday Times* newspaper. Russell interviewed me over the phone, mostly about the exhibition, and his piece was subsequently published in a column in the *New York Times* together with a photo of myself.<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2)

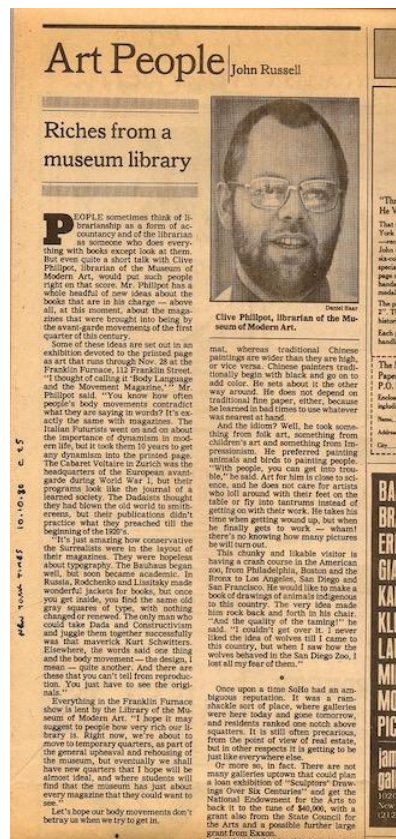


Figure 2 John Russell's column 'Art People' in the *New York Times*, 10 October 1980, 25.

One person who digested Russell's column was the Pop artist/mail artist, Ray Johnson. I only discovered this when I received a letter from him fairly soon afterwards. My guess is that several items in the piece caught his eye, such as mentions of Dada and Surrealism, the Museum of Modern Art, the alternative space Franklin Furnace, and even the photo of the curator?<sup>4</sup>

This letter marked the beginning of a long correspondence with Ray that lasted until I returned to England – and Ray died. Thus this one short interview led to another extended quasi-interview that lasted about fifteen years; for, from this moment on, Ray and I not only corresponded, but talked in parallel on the phone, particularly when I was gathering material for an essay on his work for a

<sup>3</sup> John Russell, 'Art People: Riches from a Museum Library', *New York Times*, 10 October 1980, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Clive Phillpot, letter of January 1981, replying to Ray Johnson letter of 1980.

retrospective exhibition.<sup>5</sup> (I later published some of our telephone exchanges in a little illustrated book titled *Ray Johnson on Flop Art*.)<sup>6</sup> (fig. 3)

You will have appreciated that I am stretching the idea of an interview to incorporate oral exchanges. Although these semi-random encounters were, for me, as much a seasoning of my day rather than a constructed dialogue, I think that it is not inaccurate to think of them as an extended interview, especially since I was frequently trying to retrieve facts about Ray to include in my writings. In parallel, he was happy to relate facts and stories about his work and life, and to offer sources to pursue.

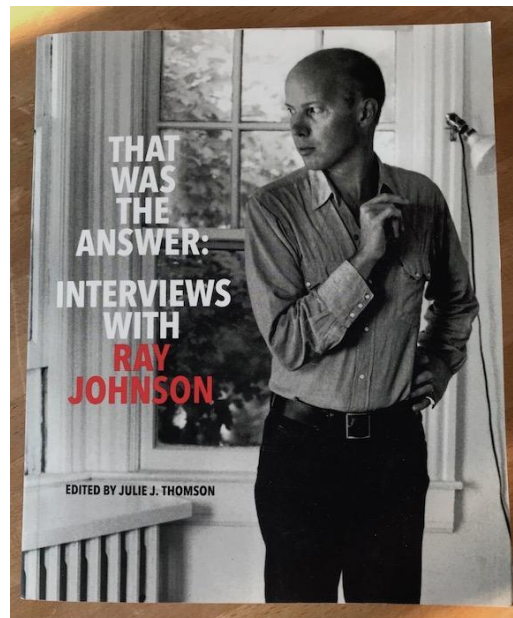


Figure 3 *Ray Johnson on Flop Art*, by Ray Johnson and Clive Phillpot, 2008.

Figure 4 Julie J. Thomson, ed., *That Was the Answer: Interviews with Ray Johnson*, 2018.

As if to confirm my categorisation of these exchanges, just last year a book of interviews with Ray entitled *That Was the Answer . . .* was compiled by Julie J. Thomson.<sup>7</sup> (fig. 4) This book is a rich resource and includes one of our telephone exchanges – even though it is a shade different from an interview. Perhaps I will be excused for blowing my own trumpet if I give you a taste of the last ‘interview’, which was the result of Ray asking me to ask him three questions about one of his recent performances (which I had not witnessed, but for which he brought some photos to the museum to show me). Here is the last of the three questions that I submitted to Ray, followed by his answer:

<sup>5</sup> Clive Phillpot, ‘The Mailed Art of Ray Johnson’, in *More Works by Ray Johnson 1951–1991*, Philadelphia: Moore College of Art and Design, 1991, 4–10.

<sup>6</sup> Clive Phillpot, *Ray Johnson on Flop Art: fragments from conversations with Ray Johnson 1988–1994*, London: Fermley Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Julie J. Thomson, ed., *That Was the Answer: Interviews with Ray Johnson*, Chicago: Soberscove Press, 2018, 193–194.

Q3 CP Did you feel the weight of history on you during the performance?  
 If so, how much did it weigh?  
 A3 RJ Yes. Weighed 451 tuppence.

I will break off here. Explanations of a kind, and indeed the whole curious story, which has more wrinkles, were published in *Lightworks Magazine* in 2000, and later in my book *Booktrek* in 2013.<sup>8</sup> (fig. 5)

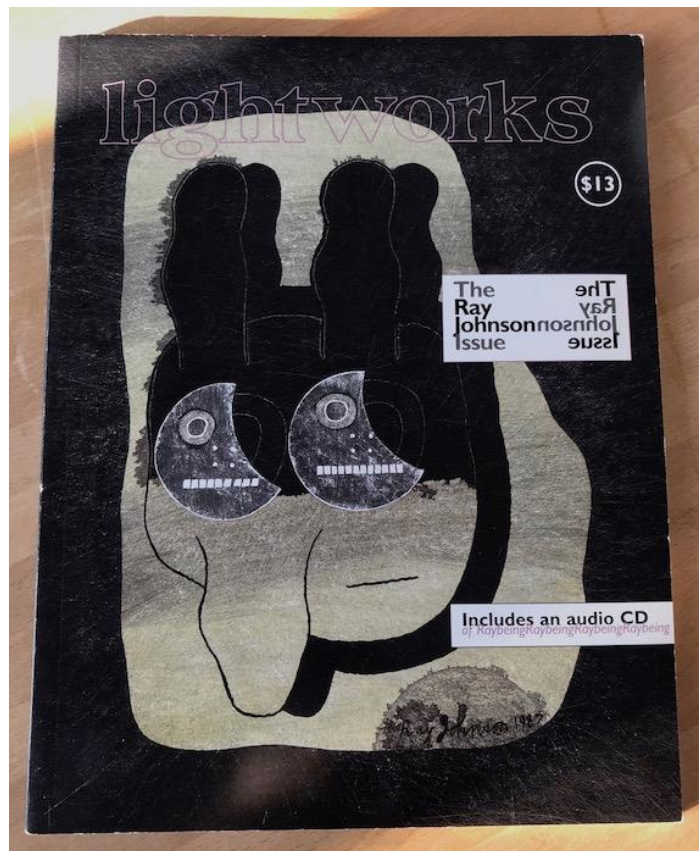


Figure 5 *Lightworks*, no. 22, 2000. Cover image by Ray Johnson.

I was involved in other interviews over the years. One that I was very pleased with was what one might call a 'group interview' on the theme of 'What Do Artists Read?' for which I had asked the artists well in advance to make lists of their regular and current reading matter. I chaired this session at the College Art Association annual meeting in New York in 1986, and the artists whom I invited to participate were Lawrence Weiner, Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper and Rafael Ferrer. I should say, perhaps, that I felt rather like a circus ringmaster or the conductor of an orchestra as I tried to organise the responses of the four brilliant artists. The proceedings were memorable and stimulating. I also received many

<sup>8</sup> Clive Phillpot, 'Two Printed Books by Ray Johnson', *Lightworks Magazine*, no. 22, 1995–2000, 56–59. Also: Clive Phillpot, *Booktrek: Selected Essays on Artists' Books (1972–2010)*, Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2013, 234–243.

positive responses from people who attended. (I have since deposited an imperfect recording of the session to *Artists' Lives* at the British Library.)<sup>9</sup>

Another useful experience was interviewing Ed Ruscha over the phone, and over the Atlantic, when I was working on the essay for the catalogue raisonné of his books. I fixed a small microphone to the telephone receiver with a rubber sucker and successfully recorded Ed's answers to my questions on mini-cassettes. I was able to use most of Ruscha's responses in my essay, but the footnotes that drew attention to these telephone conversations gave the cumulative impression that these were extracts from a much longer interview. Thus a researcher got in touch with me after the book had been published to ask if she could read the whole interview. So I had to explain to her that the cited details of the recordings were just that – details that generally related to just one point in the essay that was in need of clarification. There was no real flow or sequence to the questions, as in a conversation or, indeed, in an interview.<sup>10</sup>

I was talking to Ray Johnson for close to fifteen years. The other artist to whom I surrendered a lot of my time was the stateless artist and activist Gustav Metzger. Although I had first met him in the 1960s and 1970s, my conversations with him really began when we met each other again after we had both been living abroad. We were reunited at the marvellous Yves Klein exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1994, which was the year that I returned to London from the USA, and Gustav had returned from his prolonged peregrinations in Europe. It turned out that the poet and publisher Simon Cutts wanted to stage an exhibition of Metzger's work, as well as publishing a book with a text by the artist and a bibliography and biographical chronology. The book acquired the title *Damaged Nature: Auto-Destructive Art* (1996).<sup>11</sup> (fig. 6) My role in the project was to work with Gustav to record the details of his life, as well as to track his bibliographical lineage. The book and the exhibition were launched at Cutts' gallery in Spitalfields named *workfortheeyetodo*. I am afraid that I cannot now remember all the details from a quarter of a century ago, but it was at this time that Cathy Courtney, director of *Artists' Lives*, which had been incorporated into the activities of the British Library, encouraged me to interview Gustav for *Artists' Lives* (and for the nation). I was happy to accept this mission, and very soon realised that all the details that I had gathered when talking to Gustav to obtain biographical information for the book could perhaps be parlayed directly into questions for the interview. And so it was. I guess it is not so often that an interviewer has an

<sup>9</sup> I have never attempted to transcribe the recordings, but I believe that this would be a worthwhile activity. Every one of the four artists had something illuminating to say about their reading. For an account of this session, see: Russell Ferguson, 'CAA/ARLIS Joint Session: What do Artists Read?', *Art Documentation*, 5: 2, Summer 1986, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Ruscha's clarifications will be seen in the footnotes to my essay 'Sixteen Books and Then Some' in Siri Engberg and Clive Phillpot, *Edward Ruscha Editions 1959–1999: Catalogue Raisonné*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999, 58–78. (This essay has been reprinted in Clive Phillpot, *Booktrek: Selected Essays on Artists' Books (1972–2010)*, Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2013, 208–233.)

<sup>11</sup> Gustav Metzger, *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*, London: workfortheeyetodo, 1996.

accumulation of biographical information that can be bounced straight into a narrative.

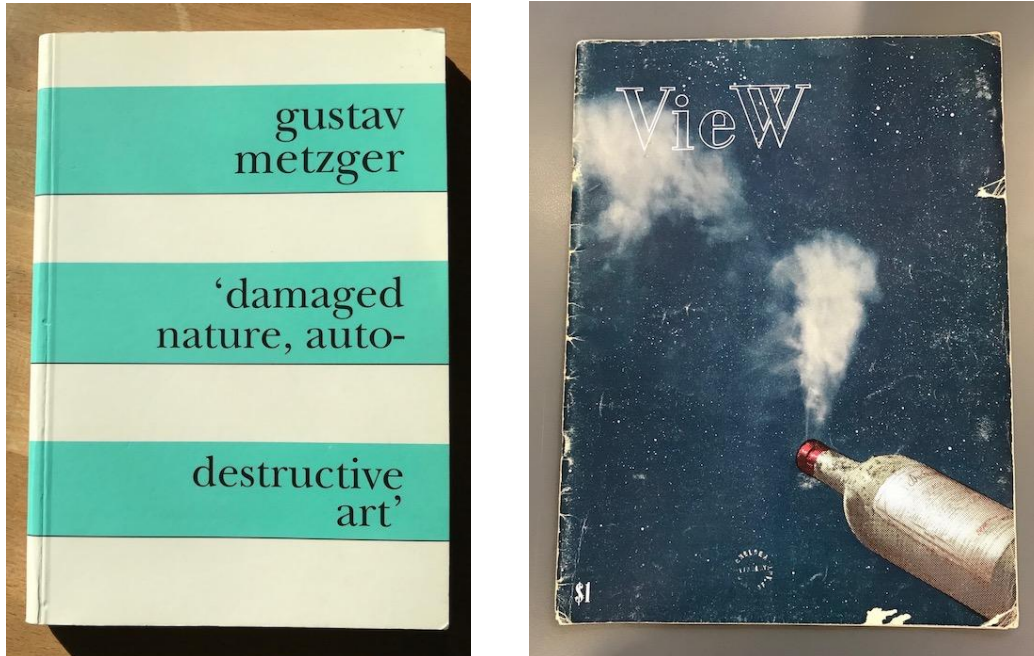


Figure 6 *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*, by Gustav Metzger, 1996.

Figure 7 *View [Magazine]*, 5: 1, March 1945, Duchamp cover.

In referring to the accumulation of information in preparation for an interview, I should mention an embarrassing omission of mine, relating to the time when I and Lynne Tillman were interviewing Charles Henri Ford, the editor of *View* magazine (1940–47), in his apartment in the Dakota building in New York in November 1980. (Just one month before John Lennon was assassinated there.) Only after our meeting had concluded did I take a longer look at issues of the magazine. (fig. 7) In the last issue I noticed belatedly that in an announcement about the following issue (which never appeared), it was stated that it would include an article by Walter Benjamin. I have to admit now that I never subsequently tried to locate Charles Henri Ford’s archives, nor to identify Benjamin’s article to determine if it was ever published elsewhere. The very fact that Benjamin might have been included in the next issue is intriguing. How and why did this (nearly) happen?<sup>12</sup>

My regular sessions with Gustav Metzger progressed relatively chronologically. When we finally stopped the process, we had accumulated thirty-five hours of dialogue. Most of the sessions were in a building in South Kensington where National Life Stories [the parent organisation of *Artists’ Lives* project] was then based. We met there frequently over the months it took to complete the

<sup>12</sup> Clive Phillpot and Lynne Tillman, ‘An Interview with Charles Henri Ford: When Art and Literature Come Together’, *Franklin Furnace Flue*, New York, no. 3, December 1980. Only recently have I learned that the Ford Papers are at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Some time I must pick up the trail again. The reference to Walter Benjamin is on page 3 of *View*, 7: 3, Spring 1947.

interview, and I continued to draw upon his biographical chronology, though he tried to get me to break away from this occasionally.

Gustav had very precise recollections of events and people, and would take me to task if I made incorrect assumptions. In addition, I was quite taken aback when I heard the recordings when they were installed in an exhibition of his work at Tate Britain in 2015. For Gustav's responses and statements were expressed in exceptionally clear and thoughtful English, which, after all, was his fourth language after Hebrew, French and German.

Some readers may know the London radio station Resonance FM (104.4FM). As it happened, I was asked by William English, who is an on-air regular, if I would come on his programme to talk initially about, and with, Gustav Metzger, but subsequently about Ray Johnson, too.<sup>13</sup> So here was another version of my experiences, tailored this time for radio.

Although I titled this paper 'Both Sides of the Microphone', so far I have recalled more about myself as interviewer, and neglected a few occasions when I was the subject of an interview. However, in 2014 the tables were emphatically overturned when two people from the USA, whom I had not met before, independently asked me if we could indulge in a recorded dialogue that would be transcribed and published by *BOMB* magazine in New York. I was happy to accept the two invitations. The first was with Elizabeth Zuba, a writer and poet living in Brooklyn. (fig. 8) I assumed that I would be interviewing her about her particular involvement with Ray Johnson. She proposed an extended email conversation which was acceptable to me. This began in 2014, but only after my surprise that *she* actually wanted to interview *me* (!) about *my* involvement with Ray Johnson! Pasting an interview together via email is, of course, very different from making a recording in real time, but one does have the opportunity to carefully construct responses. So here is another form for an interview. Elizabeth was well-informed, and it turned out that the interview became much more of a dialogue, which was very fruitful. I learned that she was about to publish an anthology of Ray's mailings: *Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson*.<sup>14</sup> Her engagement in this endeavour meant that she had been well-steeped in Ray's methods and style. (I did have one regret about our piece, and that was that it only appeared online, in 2014, and not in the regular printed version of *BOMB* magazine.)<sup>15</sup>

I was then surprised to receive another unexpected invitation around this time when Ashley McNelis of New York University emailed to ask if she could interview me, too, this time on the subject of artist books. Even more surprising was the fact that Ashley's request for an interview mentioned that she would like the interview to appear in *BOMB* magazine as well! (fig. 9) Some time elapsed after

<sup>13</sup> 30 July 2010, *Wavelength: Destruction in Art (part 6) with Gustav Metzger*. 19 November 2010, *Wavelength: Clive Phillpot on Ray Johnson on Flop Art*.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Zuba, *Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson, 1954–1994*, Los Angeles: Siglio, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> 'Clive Phillpot by Elizabeth Zuba', *BOMB* magazine (online edition), 31 July, 2014. See [www.bombmagazine.org/articles/clive-phillpot](http://www.bombmagazine.org/articles/clive-phillpot).



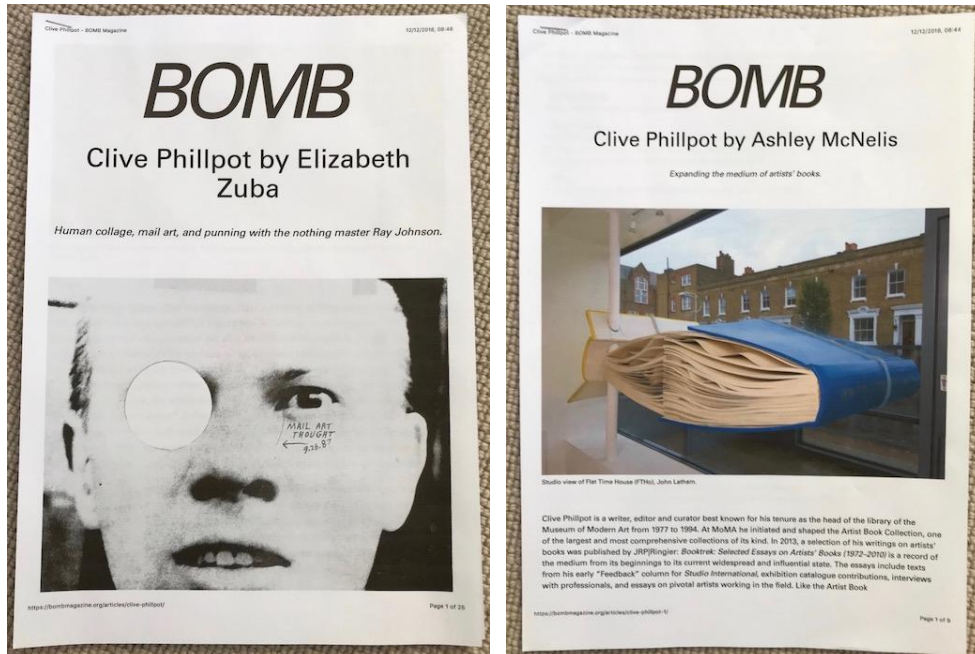


Figure 8 *BOMB magazine online*, 'Clive Phillpot by Elizabeth Zuba'. Cover image: collage by Ray Johnson, 2014.  
 Figure 9 *BOMB magazine online*, 'Clive Phillpot [& Artist Books] by Ashley McNelis'. Cover image: Window of Flat Time House by John Latham, 2015.

I had agreed to Ashley's proposal. Then she let me know that she would be in London in June 2014 and would like to meet. So, on this occasion, the interview was face to face. We agreed to meet in the café at the ICA in London. I was well acquainted with this venue, but had not appreciated how noisy it could be. So, as it happened, Ashley and I engaged in serial table-hopping around the ICA in order to hear each other clearly. On reflection I thought that all these interruptions would undermine Ashley's narrative but when she later gave me a copy of the edited transcript, I was impressed by her ability to maintain a clear view of her goals, despite the conditions.<sup>16</sup>

The experience of twice being the subject of a fairly lengthy interview turned out to be satisfying for me. Both interviews brought out themes and memories that would not have been written down, had it not been for my inquisitors' perspicacity. Perhaps this expansive aspect of interviews is already obvious to readers, but to me, as subject, it was a rewarding aspect of the event.

These two interviews, both of which I feel are very successful in relating my involvement with two subjects that have been so important to me, are easily accessible on the internet; they were, however, the first two of three interviews that I began in 2014/15. The third interview was by Cathy Courtney, Project Director of Artists' Lives, an oral history project run by National Life Stories at the British Library.<sup>17</sup> I felt honoured to have been invited to add my stories to this national resource. (fig. 10) (As well as guiding both the project and assisting the chair of the

<sup>16</sup> 'Clive Phillpot by Ashley McNelis', *BOMB magazine* (online edition), 14 January 2015. See [www.bombmagazine.org/articles/clive-phillpot-1](http://www.bombmagazine.org/articles/clive-phillpot-1).

<sup>17</sup> Clive Phillpot interviewed by Cathy Courtney, for Artists' Lives. British Library shelfmark: C466/363.

Advisory Committee, Cathy Courtney is an accomplished interviewer, and it was a pleasure for me to have had distant memories subtly elicited from my consciousness and transferred into the national record.)



Figure 10 Cathy Courtney (far right) at an *Artist Book Exhibition* in Tate Gallery Basement, 1996. Photo: John Christie.

Since Cathy and I began our two-step in 2014, I have conducted other interviews. Two of these were the result of an invitation to contribute to the catalogue of Yoko Ono's 2015 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. My contribution was to include transcribed recordings of interviews with two people who worked with the artist when she first came to London. Consequently, I arranged to meet John Dunbar, who was director and curator of the Indica Gallery in London in 1966, and who gave Yoko her first London exhibition, and to talk with Nicholas Logsdail who was director of London's Lisson Gallery and who showed her work next – in 1967.

It turned out that there was a lot of pressure on the capacity of the MoMA catalogue to contain all the information that was or could have been assembled. So it was eventually decided to drop several texts from the published catalogue, including my interviews, and I was asked to write an essay instead about Yoko's actions in London in 1966–69. (The interviews were supposed to appear online instead, but this did not happen.)<sup>18</sup>

Another recent occasion for conducting an interview was when I curated an exhibition at the Chelsea Space in London in 2015. The title of the show was *In Peril on the Sea: Sailing Ships, Stormy Seas*. This exhibition had its roots partly in a

<sup>18</sup> Clive Phillpot, '1966–1969', in Klaus Biesenbach and Christophe Cherix, eds, *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show 1960–1971*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015, 150–155.

consideration of Marcel Broodthaers' book *Voyage on the North Sea* (1973–74). My familiarity with the work of Broodthaers then led me to adopt his innovation – whereby I would interview myself for the catalogue.

It proved remarkably difficult to be one's own interviewer, and in the end I reluctantly gave up. Instead I asked my friend, the New York satirist Joe Queenan, who appears in the UK in the *Guardian* and on BBC Radio, if he would interview me. He was up for this, and his interview was published in the catalogue of *In Peril on The Sea* – despite the fact that our conversation, though serious in intent, was occasionally humorous.<sup>19</sup> (fig. 11)

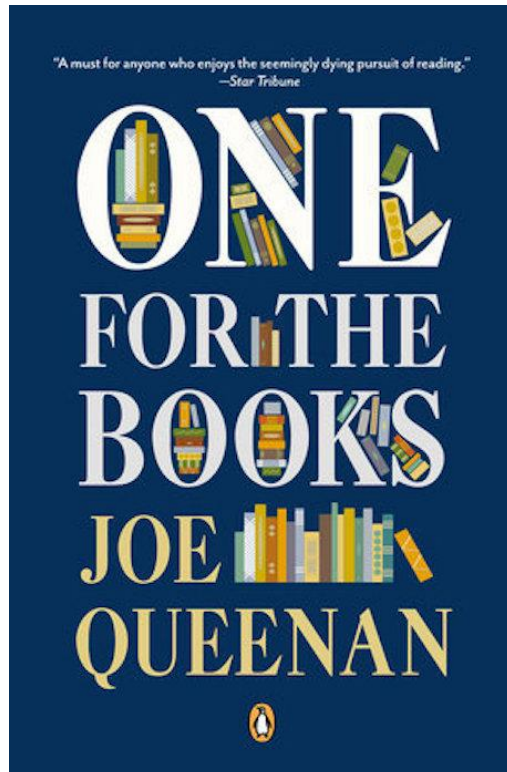


Figure 11 Joe Queenan, *One for the Books*, New York: Viking Press, 2012.

When I began this account, I referred to the importance of the state of mind of the interviewee if one is to obtain a relaxed and informative result. (And the same might also be said of the interviewer.) Another important factor in the success, or otherwise, of an interview is the subject's age and general condition. These thoughts were provoked when I compared the recordings and transcripts that I had made with Gustav Metzger in 2009 and 2016.

I had made a new recording with Gustav Metzger in 2009 for the catalogue of his retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in that year. As it happened, and for the first time, I edited out a large proportion of my side of the

<sup>19</sup> *In Peril on The Sea: Sailing Ships, Stormy Seas*, London: Chelsea Space, University of the Arts, 2015.

conversation. Gustav was, again, so eloquent that I felt that my contributions were somewhat redundant.<sup>20</sup>

I saw him fairly regularly after that time and had the idea that I might make some recordings with him that were not the result of a specific commission or project. Another recording that I made then was to compensate for a mistake I made when producing the long interview with him for *Artists' Lives*. At that time, around 1997, I was recording Gustav on a tape cassette recorder. During one session I belatedly realised that I had flipped the cassette twice instead of once, so that instead of having the recording on just two sides of tape, I had begun recording the effective third side back over the first side, thereby erasing the beginning of that session. So I wanted to make a supplementary recording of the part of his life that I had over-written.<sup>21</sup>

This recording session was unplanned, but I had assumed that Gustav would have no need for prompting when he was talking about his early life, so I did not do any new research or make any notes before asking him to make the recording. I just sprung the idea on him, and he accepted willingly. The hour's recording that resulted was almost useless. Gustav either couldn't remember details or was confused about them, and I couldn't help because I had made no preparations. It was a shock for me to realise that the ageing process was quite advanced. (fig. 12)



Figure 12 Gustav Metzger leaving the Rue de Rivoli, Paris, 25 February 2009.

<sup>20</sup> 'Gustav Metzger in Conversation with Clive Phillpot', *Gustav Metzger, Decades: 1959–2009*, London: Serpentine Gallery/Koenig Books, 2009, 20–29.

<sup>21</sup> 'Clive Phillpot talking to Gustav Metzger', typescripts, 5 February 2016 and 19 February 2016. Deposited with *Artists' Lives* at the British Library. The audio recordings for these interviews can be listened to at the British Library. Permanent catalogue entries: <http://cadensa.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgisirsi/x/0/0/5?searchdata1=CKEY7229341>; <http://cadensa.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgisirsi/x/0/0/5?searchdata1=CKEY6086775>; and <http://cadensa.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgisirsi/x/0/0/5?searchdata1=CKEY7982908>.

Gustav Metzger died on 1 March 2017, at the age of 90, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery.

**Clive Phillpot** is a writer, curator and art librarian. He has participated in the Archives of American Art, the Art Libraries Society (North American and UK branches), Franklin Furnace, NY State Council on the Arts, and Printed Matter. In 2013 JRP/Ringier published his *Booktrek: Selected Essays on Artists' Books (1972–2010)*. He has written for *Art Monthly*, *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *Art Documentation*, and many catalogues. He co-curated the exhibitions *Vides/Voids*, Paris, 2009; *Live in Your Head*, Whitechapel, 2000; and *Artist/Author*, Chicago, 1998.

clivephillpot@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)