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Oral History as Care: Preserving Memories and Maintaining Stakeholder Relationships

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Oral History as Care: Preserving Memories and Maintaining Stakeholder Relationships

Abstract

This paper will outline a recent oral history project the author undertook with the artist Bill Hutson, currently the Jennie Brown Cook & Betsy Hess Cook Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The project's impetus, process, and lessons learned will be discussed. Special attention will be paid to the ways in which the project both intersected with and deviated from standard best practices in the field of oral history, in service of the project's greater success.

This article has undergone a double-blind peer review process.

Keywords

preservation, new professionals, oral history, oral histories, oral history best practices

Author Bio

Anna Boutin-Cooper is the Research & Visual Arts Librarian at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In her position, she liaises with several academic departments, and she is the curator for both the zine and artists' book collections at the College. She holds her MLIS from Simmons University, and a BA in Theatre Studies from Emmanuel College.

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Introduction

Bill Hutson (b. 1936), also known as William R. Hutson, is an abstract fine artist living and working in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is currently the Jennie Brown Cook and Betsy Hess Cook Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Franklin & Marshall College, where he also taught in the Art & Art History Department. Hutson's work has been exhibited and collected internationally, over a lengthy career. As an African American abstract painter, Hutson has led a storied life and lived through time spent both in the US and abroad with a remarkable group of artists including Ed Clark and Al Loving, among others. In 2010, a major portion of Hutson's work was transferred to the Phillips Museum of Art, the in-house art museum at Franklin & Marshall College. In addition to this amazing gift of his art, Hutson continues to donate books, manuscripts, and archival records pertaining to his career to the Franklin & Marshall College Library Archives & Special Collections, including a collection of slides documenting Hutson's work throughout his career, a small portion of which have been digitized.



Bill Hutson in his studio, 2018.
[Credit: Padmini Mongai]

Project Impetus

Over the course of his time at Franklin & Marshall, Hutson spent much time involved in classes, even outside of his own, speaking with students about his work. It was noted by many parties that a formal oral history with Hutson would both complement and further expand the College's holdings of his work. The Phillips Museum and the College Library jointly decided to pursue this project, and agreed that its planning, execution, and management would fall under this author's jurisdiction as Research & Visual Arts Librarian.

Project Process

As this project had been in the works for a significant amount of time prior to the author's arrival on campus in August of 2018, stakeholders had already been identified, split between the College Library and the Phillips Museum of Art. An initial stakeholder's meeting was held so that Hutson and the author could meet, and so that the team could ascertain Hutson's interest in participating in the project. Hutson was cautious about the project at first, asking for a list of questions in advance to guide the interviews rather than simply sharing his story through monologue. As his request is standard best practice for oral history interviews, the stakeholder team assured Hutson that such a list would be provided prior to each interview. Providing these questions for Hutson in a timely and consistent manner created a firm foundation of trust on which to begin the oral history project.

Prior to beginning the interview phase of the project, colleagues with past experience in oral history were consulted, in order to determine appropriate resources through which to research a typical oral history project trajectory. Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* was highly recommended, so that was the primary work consulted and the book on which the project was based.¹ Well into the project, this author discovered the third edition of *The Oral History Manual*, written by Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, which was consulted as well and informed more of the transcription and post-interview processes.²

Before recording began, the author set about preparing for the interviews and creating the question sets to guide Hutson. Since Hutson requested these questions in advance, it was necessary to gain a certain amount of familiarity with Hutson's life and work to help inform the question lists. Fortunately, the College Library's Archives & Special Collections department holds much of Hutson's personal papers - his teaching records, versions and revisions of his CV, artist statements, slides of his works of art, and more. Questions were created to be as broad as possible so that Hutson could still have an element of self-direction in the interviews, preserving his agency throughout the interview process. In accordance with established best practices, over twenty hours were spent performing this archival research, not counting the hours spent laboring over the appropriate questions to ask Hutson.³

¹ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

³ Ritchie, 74.



Image of Bill Hutson working on *Journey Near the Islands*, 1980.

[Image from the Bill Hutson Slide Collection, courtesy of Bill Hutson and the Franklin & Marshall College Library Archives & Special Collections]

For the question creation, Hutson's life was split up into segments of roughly twenty years, beginning in chronological order. For each segment, there was a prepared list of ten to fifteen questions, with room in each for Hutson to include whatever he would like - usually, the first question (aside from the first interview) was whether or not he would like to address or amend any statements from the previous interview. These often led to fruitful comments from Hutson as he had reflected on what was said the last time and remembered important details or reminiscences left out.

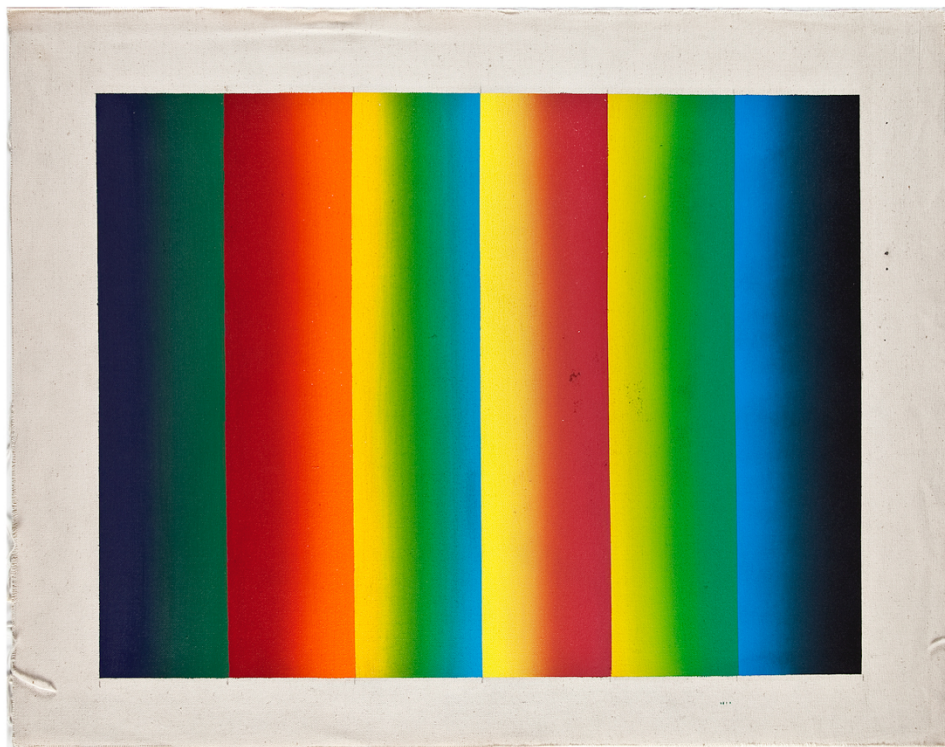
The author also worked in concert with Digital Initiatives Librarian Brianna Gormly to create a custom permissions form for the oral history, indicating its terms and giving both Hutson and this author's permission for their voices to be recorded, stored, and shared archivally. Hutson made it clear that he wanted these interviews kept private until his passing, which the College Library Archives & Special Collections will honor.

The author heavily relied on Gormly's technical expertise over the course of the project. Gormly performed research to find the best recording equipment available within budget and accompanied the author to every interview in order to do the recording. This was invaluable, as it allowed the author to focus solely on conducting the interviews. Gormly ended up using a Tascam

DR-40, which came recommended through documentation from the Oral History in the Digital Age project, and was purchased especially for the Hutson Oral History project.⁴ Files were downloaded in .wav format and saved to Gormly's desktop immediately following the interviews, after which point they were uploaded to a shared Drive folder for accessibility.

In total, there were seven interviews. The first five roughly covered a span of twenty years each, and then the last two were done as a set of concluding interviews, taking stock of the future, the process of the oral history project, and any other details that Hutson wanted to include. The interviews took place over a six-month period, from late February to July of 2019, with an interview roughly every three to four weeks, schedules permitting.

In May of 2019, at the conclusion of the seventh and final interview, the transcription process began. This was a labor-intensive process, as Franklin & Marshall College did not have access to tools to aid in transcription. Late in the process, the author's colleague, Jenn Buch, was able to help with one of the transcripts. Upon the completion of each transcript, it was audit-edited, as per suggested best practices, and the final transcript and recording were sent over to Hutson for review, as per the terms of the permissions agreement.⁵



EC 822. WILLIAM (BILL) HUTSON

Bill Hutson, *All Day Long*. 18" x 23". Gift of Bill Hutson.

[Photograph courtesy of Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin & Marshall College]

⁴ Institute of Museum and Library Services, "Ask Doug - Recorders," Oral History in the Digital Age, Institute of Museum and Library Services, accessed March 27, 2020. <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/askdoug/>.

⁵ Ritchie, 53 & Sommer and Quinlan, 13.

Intersections: Best Practice vs. Praxis

In the project description above, a few best practices that were followed were touched upon, as suggested in the background research performed on conducting oral histories. This section will elaborate on a few intersections of best practices and praxis of the actual project, commenting on how these intersections contributed to the project's success.

As mentioned above, the project's process was informed primarily by Ritchie's *Doing Oral History*, with some after-project consultation of *The Oral History Manual* by Sommer and Quinlan. The selection of project staff was informed by Ritchie's suggestion of having, at the very least, a project manager or coordinator, a role that this author assumed.⁶ Several other project team members were recruited, however, including a separate project recording technician and a secondary interview presence. Ritchie does not explicitly mandate inclusion of either of these roles, but it was critical to have support in these two areas. The first, filled by Gormly, allowed the author to focus exclusively on the interview process and not have to worry about troubleshooting the recording. The secondary interview presence role, filled by Lindsay Marino of the Phillips Museum of Art, was necessary for a number of reasons: first, to actively include the Museum in the process, and second, to have a secondary expert source on Hutson's work present. As Marino has a longstanding relationship with Hutson, this proved incredibly useful for both helping Hutson recall details and to help him become more comfortable with the process. Although it is typically undesirable to have a secondary person in the room according to best practices, it can be beneficial as "they can also help by providing forgotten information and otherwise supporting an uncertain interviewee."⁷ As Hutson had previously expressed uncertainty about the interview process, this inclusion of a familiar face ultimately led towards a successful series of interviews.

Both Ritchie and Sommer and Quinlan emphasize the importance of a thoroughly prepared interviewer, which this author took to heart. As mentioned previously, over twenty hours of archival research went into the preparation of a question list, which is also another best practice suggested by the collective authors.⁸ Another consideration for this preparation was the issue of race, and the concerns this author had as a young, white woman interviewing an elderly, African American man. All three authors do not necessarily suggest like interviewing like, but each had recommendations for cutting across gender and racial lines in oral history interviews. Chief among these was respect for the interviewee and a thorough preparedness in terms of research on their life.⁹ Although as Sommer and Quinlan and Ritchie reference, sometimes crossing this divide can result in biased interviews through the omission of certain information that one of the parties may find difficult, this author noted that Hutson was forthcoming about racial discrimination that he faced in his life, not shying away from the topic. Although the interview would likely have been different if conducted with a person of color, all stakeholders involved - including Hutson - expressed satisfaction with the final project interviews.

⁶ Ritchie, 41.

⁷ Ibid, 49.

⁸ Ritchie, 74 & Sommer and Quinlan, 63.

⁹ Sommer and Quinlan, 87 & Ritchie, 91.

One noted failure of the interview process was the inclusion on the author's part of verbal affirmations and expressions during the interviews themselves, which is advised against in both titles that the author read. Ritchie states that "vocalizing 'mm-hhms' and 'uh-huhs' will just clutter the recording," which was indeed the case once this author moved into the transcription process.¹⁰ Unfortunately, it was easier said than done to not include these verbalizations, as often there would be pauses or questions that this author felt the need to answer or fill. Aside from the mess left on the transcript from a seemingly endless amount of "mhms" and "ahs," the transcription process was thankfully quite straightforward and prescribed due to the best practices outlined by the two texts this author consulted. As the lengthiest aspect of the project, having a set of best practices to follow was necessary, though it often made this aspect of the project tedious due to the amount of attention to detail required. Altogether, there are seven transcripts - one final version for each interview - in addition to separate, currently in-progress indices and TAPE (Time Access to Pertinent Excerpts) documents for each interview, to aid in researcher use of the collection once it is opened to the public.

Future Directions

There are several future steps to be taken for this project, including edits to the transcripts in a few different forms. First, the transcripts need indexing and TAPE write ups, which is taking place at the time of the writing of this article. The transcripts will benefit from this process, as Hutson references many unique figures and locales throughout his career in the interviews, and researchers will be appreciative of completed indexes pointing to the location of his references. Second, although the collection of interviews will be kept private until Hutson's passing, the author's eventual goal for the project is to create a set of interactive transcripts, made available to the public through the Archives & Special Collections website, filled with links to all of the historical figures, works of art, and locations mentioned by Hutson. Hutson worked in proximity to and alongside such prominent artists as Al Loving, Ed Clark, and Robert Indiana, among many others. Making the transcripts interactive in this manner will serve as a jumping off point for student researchers accessing the collection, which the author estimates will happen quite frequently once the interviews are released as Hutson is a popular subject for study at Franklin & Marshall College.

Conclusion

Overall, both Ritchie and Quinlan and Sommer's texts are highly recommended to the beginner oral historian, as they each provide concrete overviews of the process. Quinlan and Sommer's text is a bit more prescriptive, giving concrete examples of forms to be used and processes to be followed. However, Ritchie's text is a classic in the field. Much of the two texts' best practices overlap, and this paper has only scratched the surface of their recommendations, given available space and the limited focus of this paper as a beginner's case study. The three best practices illustrated above - knowing one's interviewee, eliminating additional vocal confirmations and acknowledgements, and team selection - are great places for the beginner to start, but this paper should not serve as a substitute for thorough reading of the recommended texts.

¹⁰ Ritchie, 86.

This article speaks to the author's experience managing an oral history project with the artist Bill Hutson, an African American abstract artist. The project was detailed, along with its impetus, as was each step in the process. The project's praxis with the field's was also compared against commonly accepted best practices as detailed in the literature, including limiting vocalizations on the part of the interviewer, demonstrating respect for the interviewee through thorough preparation and research for the interview, and the presence of additional people in the interview. These comparisons were made in order to underscore the point that the project was context-specific, aimed at getting the best possible response from Hutson by tailoring the project to his comfort. Largely, this project has been viewed as a success, both by Hutson himself and by the stakeholder team referenced at the beginning of this article. The interviews helped maintain both the College Library and the Phillips Museum of Art's important relationship with Hutson while also preserving Hutson's memories of his own life's story.

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