

Celebrating the Lives of Others

Three creative oral-based projects by Geoff Broadway

When it is genuine, when it is born of the need to speak, no-one can ever stop the human voice. When denied a mouth, it speaks with the hands and eyes, or the pores, or anything at all. Because every single one of us has something to say to the others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others

Eduardo Galeano

The Book of Embraces

If you are to find your freedom anywhere, it will have to be within the ordinary day-to-day reality of life - the fundamental freedom is our freedom to be open to the truth- to which the freedom of action is subordinate or consequent. What is the point of our action if we ourselves are not enlightened?

Martin Heidegger

Introduction: Some thoughts on oral history and its relationship to 'everyday life'

In this paper I want discuss my own creative practice through focussing upon three projects that have been developed over the last 5 years – *The Salt Passages*, *Elders*, and *Where do I go from here?*

For many years I strongly resisted describing my work in the area of spoken word culture as having very much to do with the oral history tradition, preferring instead think of it as much more closely aligned Ewan MacColl's notion of 'actuality recordings'¹. Like many who have a background in the formal arts, I associated the concept of oral history with a rather pedestrian, historical process where materials were gathered and presented in a dry and factual manner that had little do with popular understandings of art. Thankfully, my experiences over the last 6 years has allowed me to both see the great value of this rich tradition and to understand that the boundaries between traditional oral history and art are very fluid and permeable. Indeed, some of the more prolific practitioners who have worked in this have successfully blurred any distinction between art and oral history, and in doing so created both popular and powerful social statements. Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Charles Parker (*The Radio Ballads* 1953-62 UK), Glenn Gould (*The Solitude Trilogy* 1967-77 Can) Susan Hiller (*Witness* 2000 UK), and more broadly, the street pioneer Studs Turkel (1912- US) are just a few of the practitioners who have helped transcend this definition.

Before moving on to talk about my own practice I would like to say a few words around why the oral history tradition has such power and briefly relate this to the term 'everyday life', -both areas have been very influential in the evolution of my own practice.

¹ Ewan MacColl *The Radio Ballads: How they were made, when and by whom*
<http://www.pegseeger.com/html/radioballads.html>

Essentially, oral history is a practice that puts the individual right at the centre through the sharing of his or her own experiences, perspectives and interpretations. It can radically transform our own contemporary reading of history by allowing the experiences of participating groups and people who have literally been 'hidden from history' to be shared and more fully understood. Powerful as this can be in itself, this remaking and retelling of histories is a secondary outcome to the many projects that aim to empower the participants themselves through the actual process of sharing memories and experiences, engage in the act of naming, and make what they see as their testimony.

Oral history allows peoples from all walks of life -irrespective of background, education and status - to have their story's told and their voices heard. It can bring history back into the community as a real living thing, engender a sense of belonging, act as a catalyst to span generational and cultural gaps, and give individuals dignity and self-confidence.

For those listening, watching or reading the broad range of materials that such projects may produce, a powerful interaction can take place that allow the reevaluating of what life can be like for others, stimulating understanding and feeling of empathy. Experiencing the lives and histories of other peoples and places through everyday words can be a powerful force against some interpretations employed by professional historians and media alike. The writer Paul Thomson contrasts the power of histories constructed through the words of active participants and the practice of some professional historians who, he says, engage in a kind of

'bland contemporary tourism which exploits the past as if were another foreign country to escape to: a heritage of buildings and landscapes so lovingly cared for that it is almost inhumanly comfortable, purged of social suffering, cruelty and conflict to the point that a slavery plantation becomes a positive pleasure.'²

Closely tied to this interest in oral history is how it relates to some diverse ideas around 'everyday life'. The notion of the everyday is a vital, rich term that has been explored and discussed by left-field thinkers in the west throughout the last century (and interestingly many eastern thinkers have expressed the centrality of a similar conception), many of whom express what see as its inherently open and transformatory potential.

In simple terms the everyday is the place of the right here and now, the place of direct, lived experience. Our lives are made up of myriads of moments that perpetually come into being and pass away, and we connect these moments together through the stories we make of ourselves and the world around us *through* engaging with others and that world. It is this 'now-ness' of life that is, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, 'the paramount reality where we create, cognize,

² Paul Thompson: The Voice of the Past pg 1 Open University 1988

contemplate, live our lives and die.³ Raymond Williams points towards its more paradoxical nature when he says 'it is the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden'⁴

It is the fluidity of this now-ness, the space where we continually engage with and rationalise about our lives, that means that life is always open and (whether we like it or not) subject to change and transformation. As we encounter life and shape our understanding through our encounters and exchanges with others, it is potentially rich with transformatory moments that can contribute to our self-realisation as aware and connected individuals. At one level this may seem to be the most banal and obvious thing to say, but actually it is my view that most of us have such strong threads that bind us to the past and many fixations and obsessions about the future that a real understanding of ourselves and what actually happens to us in the now is obscured: as Williams says – 'the most obvious and the best hidden'.

The Projects

The Salt Passages

In 1999 I was invited to become the first digital artist in residence at the Virtual Reality and Innovation Centre at the University of Teesside, in the northeast of England. The residency was an opportunity to spend 8 months developing my growing interest in the creative possibilities of rearticulating the thoughts and experiences of others and in doing produce a social reflection of the difficult changes underway in Teesside- a once mighty industrial area that included ship-building, steel productions, coal mining and chemical and oil refining.

I immediately started to collect many hours of video footage of this visually striking and dramatic area while also getting to know as many different local people as I could. I was soon invited into people's houses, youth centres, residential homes and work places to discuss this project about Teesside and make recordings with the participants. In making *The Salt Passages* project I recorded conversations with about twenty participants. The recordings were centred on Teesside, its transformation and the participating individuals own experiences and perceptions of their own lives. The conversations lasted between 30 minutes and 3 hours, a factor that was obviously determined by people's available time, but also by people's age. To make a generalisation: those who were more mature in their years both had more to say and most wanted to be heard and as such were the most willing participants. Those who were were at the younger end of the age spectrum tended to have less to say and spoke more of their immediate concerns for the future. Most strikingly, some

³ Mikhail Bakhtin: Critiques of Everyday Life – Michael Gardiner pg 48 Routledge 2000

⁴ Raymond Williams Popular Culture and Everyday Life pg 10: [Toby Miller](#), Alec W McHoul. SAGE Publications 1998

of the younger participants found it difficult to understand why I would be at all interested in themselves, their lives, or what they might have to say.

The process through which I was engaging with the participants was not one marked by formal interviews but that of dialogue or conversation. I made it clear that I had no particular questions to ask but wanted more to talk with the participant about their life and relationship to area – whatever they wanted to share - and then see what would arise. The difference for is significant. In an interview there is usually a very clear demarcation between the interviewer and the subject of the interview, and is usually marked with predetermined questions. With conversation there is some shared commonality, where both parties have valid views and experiences, and the space is open to reflect back and empathise. The nature of this kind of interaction allows a deeper level of authentic connection to be reached in the link between the two participating people and that the project participant has a genuine sense that what they say is heard and will be shared with others. And it is this sharing that allows us to relate to others as subjects rather than objects. As separate individuals we – at least in a general sense – can be ‘validated’, finding some sense of connection through a sharing our self with others through the use of language. In Bakhtin’s words: ‘to be means to communicate. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognised’.⁵

In the process of making this project the next issue was how to edit and shape the significant quantities of material into an interactive environment (the residency was based upon that expectation that I must use new technology as the main vehicle for this project). I was interested in trying to develop a form that might allow the users to be less aware of the technology and focus on the experiencing the moving combination of words, sounds and images. After much experimenting with the programmer Sean Clark, *The Salt Passages* CD-ROM emerged. It consists of three distinct areas that are accessed via a fluid interface, each area allowing the user to explore the work by moving the mouse cursor around the screen to reveal sound ‘fields’ and video clips – there is minimal mouse-clicking involved. The work smoothly combines the words of the participants, video images of their faces, a central composite of video scenes from Teesside, and an ambient background track. The user can choose which audio loop to listen to, how loud this is, and how much this mixes with the other audio loops.

In constructing the project in this way I was interested in how this method of representation could be potentially evoke feelings of empathy or and identification with the participants by the user. I was (and am) very much interested in the word ‘sentiment’ in relationship to this work – a term very often used in a dismissive way, suggesting an ‘unwarranted excess of emotion.’⁶ The

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin *ibid* page 57

⁶ John Roberts. *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* pg 129
Published Manchester University Press 1998

writer and critic John Roberts talks about the notion of sentiment in a very different way: 'an understanding of sentiment that refers to a sense of shared intimacy with emotional lives of others, of fraternity.'⁷ To take this further, the real question for me is how much can the broad, complex range of human experience that include love, alienation, generosity, hopes, illusions, and disappointments, all of which are integral to our lives, find some expression in a singular artwork about a specific place and time, and that others can connect with? Perhaps the answer to this mainly lies with the user, but for me the making of this project clarified it a little clearer through sharing of the work with the participants during each stage, and in hearing their own thoughts and responses to the final work.

Responsibility and Personal Testimony: Where do I go from here?

*'This, then, is all. It's not enough, I know.
At least I'm still alive, as you may see.
I'm like the man who took a brick to show
How beautiful his house used once to be.'*
Bertolt Brecht⁸

On returning from a year in New Zealand, I was struck by the media furore over the 'new' refugee and asylum issue: we were being 'invaded' 'overrun' and 'taken advantage of' with our 'liberal welfare system'. The very meaning of the words sanctuary, refugee and asylum were actively being changed to mean to loop-hole, cheats and liars.

Shortly after I was invited to be the 2000/ 2001 artist in residence at Durham Cathedral, located in the north of England, I soon happened upon what was known as the Sanctuary Knocker.⁹ This was a large doorknocker situated on the North Side of the cathedral and stands today as a bold testament to a pre-reformation church law that allowed individuals in serious political or civil difficulty to take refuge for 40 days within the confines of the cathedral. After this time they either then had to face the rule of law or given safe passage to the coast and depart the English shores.

It was this manifestation of an English legacy of the historic right to asylum and with it the positive human traits of compassion, protection and fairness that was the catalyst for me to begin to make the project that became *Where do I go from here?*

The question for me was how to go about making a project that meaningfully engaged with the politically charged issue of asylum and refuge in our society? Two interlinked things were clear from the outset: firstly the project had to be centred around individual refugees and asylums seekers talking in their own

⁷ ibid

⁸ Bertolt Brecht in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*. Forche', Carolyn, ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1993

⁹ for more context see *Lord, give me sanctuary*
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2151213.stm>

words, and secondly, I had to really understand what the asylum issue was all about, what was creating it and who were the people caught up in the centre. The next 10 months was spent getting to know as many people from the local refugee and asylum seeker community as I could. These were made up of individuals from the globally troubled countries that included Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, DR Congo, Zimbabwe, Kurdistan, Bosnia, and Sudan. Most of who, as I later came to understand, had found safety in the northeast of England only after undergoing arduous and dangerous journeys to get to the relative safety of these shores.

I spent as much time as I was able in the nearby city of Sunderland, initially in the drop-in centres where up to 200 people from the very diverse communities would gather, drink tea and start to get to know one another. This was a dramatically contrasting environment to that which accompanied my privileged role of 'artist in residence' at the Durham Cathedral, with its many freedoms, large studio and quite lavish comforts.

As I got to know people and explain what I wanted to do – make an art project that could dramatically communicate to others about what it means to be a refugee or asylum seeker in direct, human terms – I gradually found people who were willing to talk with me and agree to be recorded.

This was a uniquely different project to *The Salt Passages* where most people did not attach a great significance to being recorded in talking about their lives and experiences. This project raised many initial concerns that I had to address. Firstly, there was a real fear that by talking and sharing their words with others it could have a significant impact upon loved ones at home. Many felt that if the authorities at home found out through this project where they were and what they were saying then this might have some negative implications for those left behind, some of who were either in detention or under close surveillance.¹⁰

Secondly, for the interaction to work I really has to get to know some of the participants very well in order to build up a level of trust. Getting to know people was relatively easy, but because of the way that the asylum system works in England, many are shifted around from place to place, city to city, at very short notice. I would very often arrive for a recording to find the person who I had arranged to meet had been moved the previous day. This brought home with great clarity just how difficult it was for them to find some real connection to any particular place or community.

Thirdly, a great many of the people who I befriended were in a great state psychological distress, suffering from emotional pain, struggling with nightmarish memories, in grieving over missed or missing loved ones, and finding themselves very lonely and isolated in England. During many of the recordings individuals would often get angry, or break down, many times in floods of tears. It was initially difficult for me to deal with these situations, at first feeling terrible that maybe I was asking them to talk about things that were best not remembered.

¹⁰ Although it was expected that the showing of this project work would be quite limited, it was agreed that most people who participated would remain anonymous, and I would not ask to take images of them - something I felt had worked well in *The Salt Passages* and initially wanted to continue.

But the truth was that for many people the act of talking to me was an opportunity to let go of so much of what they were carrying around inside. I soon realised that for all the people I spoke with, making these recordings represented a very important act and an opportunity to testify – ‘this is my life, this is who I am and this is my story’- and this had implications of a level of responsibility on myself that I was only becoming aware of.

The 18 participants trusted me with their stories for two main reasons: to help contribute to them coming to terms with the terrible pain of what had happened to them, and to try and reach out so that others in their new host communities could understand who they really were and what was happening in their communities back home. As one participant, William B. said: ‘...they (the British government and the people) don’t yet know what happened to me – if only they knew what had happened to me then... they would not be saying these things about me and treating me in this way’

The stories and testimonies I recorded reflect persecution, loss and pain, explain what life is like for them now in Sunderland¹¹ and express their hopes for the future. Running throughout all of the recorded conversations is the sense of enduring human fortitude and the will of life that seeks to survive in face of almost unbelievable physical and mental hardships. In talking to me they making an opportunity to take one more step towards them taking some control back into their lives, reconciling themselves to what had happened to them and to others they knew and loved. The writer William Westerman talks about this process as a way of

‘...making sense of a destructive, violent past, a past in which one often felt victim, and of triumphing over that experience, turning it into a motivation for living and working in the pursuit of certain social ideals.’¹²

A significant issue in the making of this project was the fact that most of the people I spoke with were in the early stages of learning English and struggled to really express what they really wanted to say in their newly acquired foreign tongue. Mark Robinson, who wrote an introduction to this project, suggests that their words become

‘...paradoxical: at once naïve in their expression, and thus ‘sincere’, the haltingness of the English adding extra layers of poignancy... but also artificial and constructed in a way mother-tongue testimony might not be. Although the individuals here speak passionately, bitterness is only apparent in one or two: those whose English is most impressive. It is as if the control of language allows

¹¹ To compound difficulties many were housed within local communities who were often hostile and sometime violent towards them, reflecting the prejudice and ignorance that emanated from the popular press.

¹² William Westerman, pg 230, *The Oral History Reader* ed Rob Perks & Alistair Thomas publ. Routledge 1998, originally published as paper titled *Central American refugee testimonies and performed life histories in the sanctuary movement*.

for this expression, this emotion; as if a more rudimentary facility somehow keeps those negative emotions in check, or merely from being expressed – or heard.

Using an interpreter was not really possible for this project – the most important thing was for the participants to be heard in their own direct words, as they had communicated them to me.

The responsibility was now on me to edit the eighteen recordings and devise the context that viewers would encounter their words. How to do this well worried me greatly – and the question I asked myself many times was how could I even justify making an artwork out of such words? How was I to do this? In the studio at Durham Cathedral I tried to develop a form for the work that could hold the words of the participants but not dominate them. I wanted it to be able to create a sense of emotional connections through use of space, light and sound. If done effectively it could potentially open a space for the viewer, allowing them to feel empathy through some basic level of human identification and understanding. It was John Berger who pointed ‘that in order to understand the experience of another it is necessary to dismantle the world as seen from one's own place within it, and reassemble it as seen from that of another’.¹³ To listen to these voices and hear what they speak of, and to encounter them as fellow human beings, would hopefully allow others to move towards understanding the incredible courage and fortitude each of these individuals had shown in surviving in the face of the hardest questions life could possibly have asked of them.

Where do I go from here? Is made up of three pools of water, ringed with local slate, into which video images are projected. The moving images are open, elemental scenes shot across the region, and feature sky, sea, water reflections and the diverse landscape. Around each pool 18 small speakers are suspended at various heights, each one with a small blue light at its centre. Through these speakers individuals talk, the volume at a near whisper, encouraging the viewer/listener to really get intimate to these voices. Throughout the darkened space of the installation abstract sounds dynamically shift across the installation space, evoking sounds of nature interleaved with more ominous, threatening rumbles.

During the making of the work it was very important to try to provide as much opportunity for the participants to see the actual work in progress to provide feedback and reflect upon what I was trying to achieve. As I pointed out, I found this a very worrying process, and regularly experienced anxiety about making art out of such experiences. As a result, some of the participants regularly came to my studio at Durham Cathedral to a comment upon work in progress. This became a very important component in the development and direction of the project as some of the participant's relationship with the final work grew.

¹³ John Berger, quoted by John Roberts *ibid* pg 132

The final showing of this work was very successful in that the participants were by now taking some kind of ownership of the project.

The eventual showing of this project got a reasonable amount of regional press and several thousand people saw the installation. But I was also left a little disappointed with my showing the work in an art gallery context primarily as this only really attracted certain kinds of audiences and thus limited its reach. Although the showings were the subject of many group visits, including several schools classes, and prompted several radio interviews, it may yet have been much more effective if it was sited in the middle of the shopping centre or somewhere with equal public access.

Nevertheless, it was an incredibly moving and indeed humbling experience for me to make this project. Simply put, getting to know these very different people really opened my eyes, helped me challenge my own, until then unknown prejudices, and to make some enduring friendships that have last to this day. I am honoured to be able to have got to make this project with these very different people, and be able work with their words.

The Elders

What is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meaning
Alessandro Portelli¹⁴

I strongly have this feeling... that our everyday life is at one and the same time banal, platitudinous, over familiar, and yet mysterious, extraordinary. I have even more strongly the feeling that facing death leads one to search for some sense of meaning in ones existence
Brian Magee¹⁵

When I was invited by the Jubilee Arts / c/PLEX project – now renamed The Public - to come to West Bromwich in order to make a new project, one of the first things that struck me about the town was the seemingly large amount of elderly people who populated the shops in its centre. The relationship between the generations in our culture was something I was interested in. I had recently read with great interest in Hugh Brody's book *The Other Side of Eden*¹⁶ how the Inuits, like much aboriginal society, placed a great emphasis on the elder generations as the purveyors of wisdom and experience, and how they played an essential role in the telling of rich stories that effectively were the living history – and thus the meaning - of their culture. I was struck by how different this cultures

¹⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different* reproduced in *The Oral History Reader* pg 56

¹⁵ Brian Magee, *Men of Ideas*, pg 62, Publ by Oxford, 1978

¹⁶ Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden - Hunter Gatherers, Farmers and the Shaping of the World*. Publ Faber & Faber 2000

relationship to ageing – one based upon respect and wisdom - to our own culture that essentially promotes youthful appearance, beauty and wealth as the most desirable *thing to possess*. As I am sure we are all aware, our western world places very little recognition upon age-acquired life experience and wisdom, with the result that much of our elderly generation is increasingly marginalised, and ultimately seen by society as a kind of problem. In making a new oral project in West Bromwich I felt there was a great deal that could be explored by getting to know and working with a wide-ranging group local of elderly people.

The project that became *Elders* started with assistant artist Cath Tarbuck and myself finding people to talk with about their lives and what it means to them now. Together we spent many hours getting to know the 18 people, all of who were over the age of 60, who were to become participants in this project. What became strikingly clear as the recordings developed was that although each individual was unique what connected each of them together was how much they recognised the importance of being heard and understood. Each person not only took an obvious pleasure in being listened too, but also treated the opportunity to tell their life story with great importance. The desire to tell their stories was so evident with some people that they would begin to talk about themselves as soon as they had opened the door. And some participants had so much they wanted to say that it took two or three visits, recording many hours of material.

The next stage of this project was the lengthy process of editing and devising the right form for the work. With regards to editing it was a lengthy process of going over and over the material and deciding what singular elements could represent this person in the artwork. In total we recorded over 56 hours of conversation from which we had to edit down to around 30 minutes of actual talking. The key question was how do you capture the essence of, on average, 18 3-hours conversations that are to be only several minutes long? As with nearly all spoken word projects, the real challenge is how to take the participant's words out of the original context- a flow and exchange of words between two people - and re-locate them into an entirely new context. Ewan MacColl, in discussing the making of *The Radio Ballads*, observed that the process

‘taught us the value of what we called "depth recording", had taught us to recognise the moments when a person would use the kind of words that could transform an individual response into a universal experience. It had taught us to recognise the necessity of lying in wait for the moment when an individual ceases to be the one who is interviewed and becomes, instead, one who is compelled by some inner need to give creative expression to all the things he or she had experienced’¹⁷

In the making of *Elders* – as in my other oral-based projects- a similar process was also at play- the words of the participants stripped down to crucial moments

¹⁷ Ewan MacColl *ibid* pg 7

that stand for much more than whole passages of extracted conversation could. But is also worth say that therefore that important things are not said only in these heightened moments - essential truths about the human condition are also present within those moments that may, applying the lens lexicon of media culture, be seen as boring and mundane- and as such worthless.

In the conversations for this project the participants speak about their perceptions of life, discussing work, material hardship, life-long love and terrible loss, expectations of happiness, what has been learnt and what has been forgotten, and, ultimately, the meaning of life. Elements of these conversations are separately played through 18 speakers that stand in semi circle in a darkened room space.¹⁸ Each speaker has a blue halogen light attached to its rear that illuminates in response to the sounds as they pass through. The voices shift around the installation space, speaking individually. The space is held together with a shifting track of environmental sounds that gently ripple across the audio-space, mirrored in turn by the flickering of the blue halogen lights.

While the making of *Elders* was still in progress we invited all the participants to the studio at Jubilee Arts to experience the work and to discuss how I was using their words in this artwork. All the participants (except those who were too frail to attend) came along to this day, and, as with the *Where do I go from here?* Project, I was quite nervous about how the work would be received. How would the participants receive the experimental way in which I used the words they trusted me with? How did they now feel about sharing some very personal experiences with others in such a way?

The response was hugely positive- from the beginning many of the participants were greatly moved by the experience of listening to both their own and others words through this installation. Following this presentation the day was spent discussing the issues of sharing personal memories, the importance of being heard, keeping alive local dialects, and ultimately reflections upon the many negative and challenges changes they perceived now taking place in our world. During this process the participants gradually took over and really made the day their own event. Ultimately it was their willingness to participate and share their stories of their own lives with myself and Cath, and the many unknown future listeners, that made for such a special project, and for them to take ownership and feel that the work was essentially about and for them in this way was truly wonderful.

Summery

Imagining what it is like to be somebody other than yourself is the core of our humanity. It is the

¹⁸ In making it I was much influenced by the form of Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* - a dramatic forty speaker sound installation
<http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/janetcardiff/>

essence of compassion and the beginning of morality
Ian McEwan

In this brief outline of some of my oral-based projects I have tried to contextualise them as part of the broad and rich oral tradition, express my interest in the ideas around the everyday, and more practically, discuss aspects of the making process itself. It is through making these projects that I have tried to engage with others through sharing a broad range of everyday experiences and perspectives in the words of people. In doing so I have tried to explore how this process of exchange between others can be an opportunity to step outside of our own sometimes narrow sense of self and meaningfully connect with others. It is certainly this that motivates me in making these projects - my own personal need to engage and connect with others, and in doing so *in this way* try to open a space, hopefully for both myself and others, that might encourage vital feelings of empathy and compassion.