

Talking with a Lung Full of Fish-Hooks

MALCOLM MCKINNON

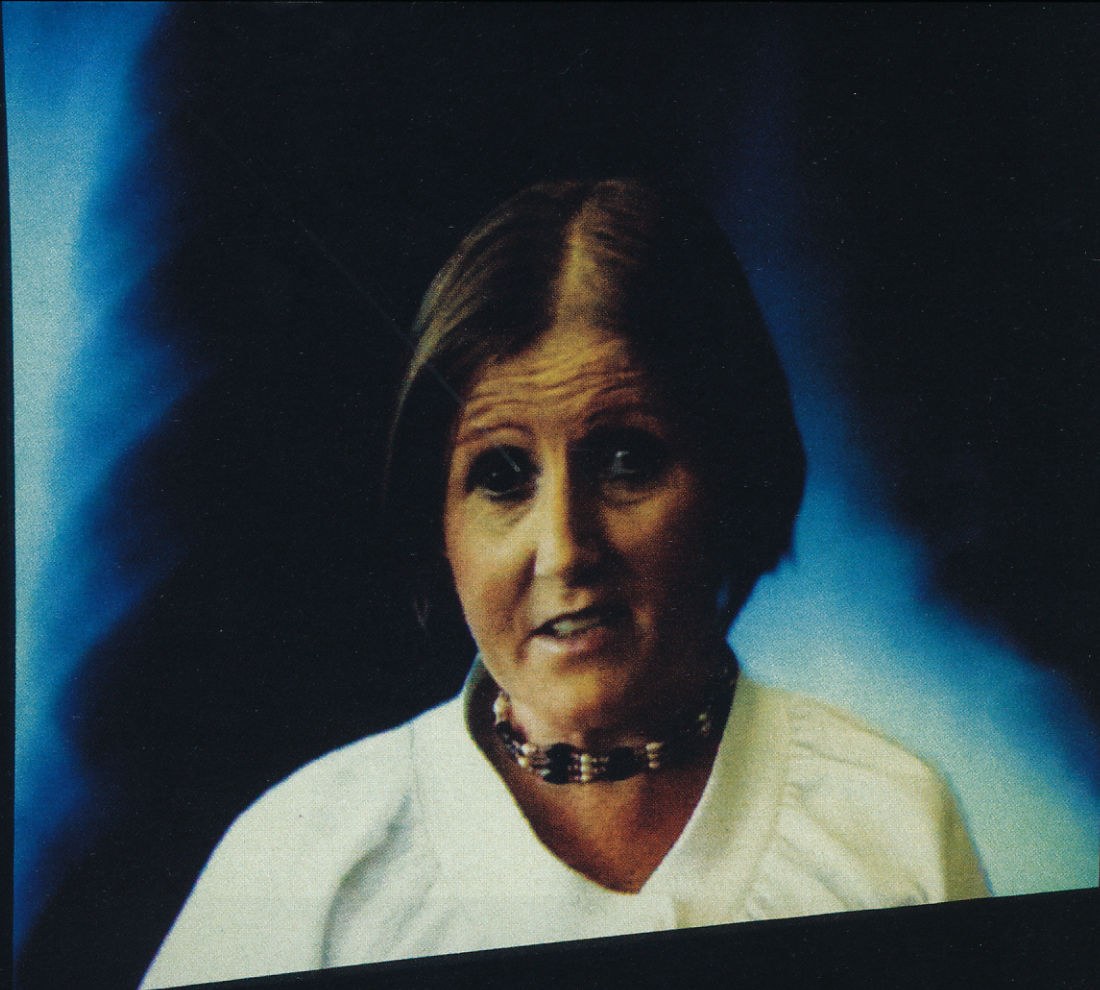
Filming an interview with someone, I usually like to have the person in front of the camera hooked up to a radio microphone nestled somewhere high on their chest. Through my headphones, I can hear the particular tone and timbre of a person's voice and the inhalation and exhalation of air needed to project that voice. Recording interviews for the *Dust* project, my headphones also gave me an intimate sense of the harsh reality of asbestos-related disease, where the sound of breathing is painful, shallow and congested. One person we interviewed described a feeling of having "fish-hooks in the lungs", while another offered us a wheezy description of "breathing through wet concrete". I mention these intimate encounters with tortured lungs right at the start because, for me, they were emblematic of interactions that were often intense and confronting.

For most of the people we interviewed for this project, the subject of asbestos was, quite literally, a matter of life and death. We interviewed people in the process of dying, sooner or later, from an asbestos-related disease. Sometimes we interviewed the families of these people too, or their colleagues or advocates. At a personal level, mortality is certainly something that focuses the mind, and so we had conversations where there was little need for small talk. People would tell us of their particular asbestos experience and then, almost straight away, we would find ourselves right at the heart of the matter. Which is to say we found ourselves



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Scene Seventeen: Liza in hospital, Liza Moran addresses the audience on her experience of mesothelioma, Brisbane season of Dust 2013.

sometimes listening to acute expressions of pain and anger, sometimes to feelings of fatalistic acceptance and, nearly always, to a particular demonstration of profound courage and personal resilience.

There's a tangled web of powerful themes embedded in these personal stories of asbestos exposure and disease. Even within a single testimony there was sometimes a compounding mass of ideas and emotions, all needing to be teased out, weighed up and interpreted. Listening to someone's story, and then figuring ways to interpret and represent that story within an artwork is never a casual business. I'm aware always of the trust that the storyteller is placing in

me, and I'm respectful both of the distinct value of the story and of the dignity of the person from whom it comes. My job is to ask intelligent and useful questions, to listen acutely and critically to the story I'm told in response, and to create some mutually understood sense of purpose for the whole endeavour.

The interviews we recorded for *Dust* provided Donna Jackson, Mark Seymour and me with stories, phrases and ideas that we could then use in writing a play script, or some songs, or a series of short video pieces. All of these artforms are highly reductive, wherein 'less is always more' and a central part of the creative task is to



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distill the most vital and resonant essence of the subject in question. It's a well-worn truism that everyone has their own distinct story, and they also have their own distinct way of telling it. Listening to these stories, mainly of regular working lives suddenly derailed by the explosion of a time bomb in the form of asbestos fibres lodged in the lungs, I was always attuned for a particular expression, a particular image, a particular idea that I could make something out of. This might sound exploitative, I know, but it's a central part of my job as an artist. I offer my skills in artfully representing a story as a crucial part of my exchange with the storyteller. This is the implicit understanding that encourages the storyteller to be generous and revealing in what they tell me, knowing that I will properly listen and then work with diligence and good faith to make something of value and interest.

Here are some precepts that guide my work as a documentary filmmaker, none more important than the other, and offered here in the hope that they'll serve as a useful reference.

It's my job to be well-prepared for an interview, to have done my research. Ideally, I want to know as much as I can of the storyteller's background before I meet them, but I also need to have a good understanding of the broader issues and context in which their story sits. Inevitably, there'll be important things that I won't know, and I'm not pretending to be a

definitive expert. But I can't afford to be naïve either.

The ear that I offer to the storyteller is sympathetic, but it's also sceptical. I'm listening critically to what I'm being told, and I'll often need to ask questions that probe beneath the surface of an initial telling. I need to convince the storyteller that I'm interested in the real and vital elements of their story, rather than just an easy relating of the surface narrative. I'm interested in the complexities and contradictions inherent in the story, so I encourage the storyteller to properly reflect on their experience and feelings, to dig beneath the surface. We're not rushing things. We're not being flippant. We're not assuming that the story we're hearing is commonplace or undeserving of special attention.

In my experience, the most profound moments in an interview might be when the storyteller says something that is a revelation to themselves as well as to me – something that surprises them, something that they haven't articulated before. This is often when we're getting down to the stuff that really matters, the stuff that is the richest and most interesting to work with. In order to reach these moments of revelation I sometimes need to pursue a persistent, intuitive or strategic line of questioning designed to shift the storyteller off the well-beaten narrative track that they're habitually inclined to follow. I sometimes refer to this questioning technique, and the responses that it's

designed to elicit, as a kind of 'talking sideways' – a deliberate exploration of narrative tangents and side alleys intended to throw up surprises.

I want a storyteller to feel comfortable in being themselves. I don't want them to put on a performance or to assume the role of an 'expert', unless role play is something that's actually in their character. I'm interested in the storyteller's particular way of talking, their particular sense of humour, the emotions to which they're most attuned. To this end, I record interviews where the style is always conversational rather than interrogative.

I don't assume that I know the answer to a question before I've asked it. I'm always willing to be surprised. In fact, I'm always *wanting* to be surprised, to learn something that I didn't know before. Until proven otherwise, I assume that the storyteller will have something exceptional to tell me, and I'm always listening out for it.

There is no such thing as a mundane interview. Sometimes, it's the people who on first impressions might seem to be the least likely raconteurs who end up telling the best stories. (Conversely, there are more polished and more rehearsed storytellers who sometimes turn out to be less interesting.)

In all of the above, I'm merely generalising. Now let me offer more specific recollections from some of the interviews we conducted for *Dust*. Even looking back from the distance of several years, and perhaps a hundred or so further interviews down the track, I can still vividly recollect these particular moments:

Neil Thompson surprising me by bursting into a rendition of the song that he used to sing as a young boilermaker in the Ballarat railway workshops, deliberately stirring up his work-mates so that they'd chase him 'round and then imprison him for a while inside a rolled up blanket of asbestos lagging.

Tony Medina telling us how he and his work-mates on the site where they were stripping out asbestos used to make a ball out of asbestos insulation, bound up with electrical tape, in order to play soccer during their lunch breaks, and also how the heavy smokers in his crew used to punch a hole in the masks they were given so that they could keep smoking even while they pulled out asbestos.

Nicki Hanslow telling us how she and her late husband, Allan, kept the fact of his debilitating mesothelioma a secret for several months so that their twin daughters could complete their final year of high school study and exams without worrying about their father.

Liza Moran telling us about the months she had to spend always inside a darkened room, after some particularly invasive treatment for her mesothelioma made her acutely photosensitive.

Ron Patton boasting that the brickwork inside the asbestos-lined crematorium that he'd built was so good that he was looking forward to admiring it from the inside, when his asbestosis finally did him in.

There was some excellent black humour in many of these stories, but there were also moments so disarming that I wasn't at all embarrassed if tears came to my eyes. Like when Tony told us that one of his greatest regrets would be to never have the chance of walking any of his three daughters down the aisle when they might come to be married, or when Nicki told us of the ongoing agony of having to respond to her dead husband's mail and to cancelling his various bank and utilities accounts.

All of these people were aware, really, that they had a compelling and important story to share and, with only some gentle prompting, they made sincere and generous efforts to do so. Just about all of these particular stories that I've listed above ended up being represented within the *Dust* show in some way, either within a scene of the theatre show, within one of the sideshow performances, or within a song or a video clip. I was listening out intently for exactly these kinds of stories, and I knew we had something good to work with as soon as I heard them.



Scene Twenty: An image of Tony Medina captured on film by Malcolm McKinnon and presented in the Adelaide season of Dust 2013.