

Interview with **RACHEL ROSENTHAL**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

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KAREN THOMAS: You are one of the few people with whom I can speak who can tell me what that early period in New York felt like. I think when people think, "Fulton Street," or "Pearl Street," they say -- "Oh, yes, that's a nice area, isn't it?" And I was interested in your speech¹, when you said you had asked Jasper to walk you home, or Cy to walk you home..

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It was Cy, yes...

INTERVIEWER: ... because it was dangerous.

ROSENTHAL: It was. But with Cy it was so funny, because he would walk me home, then we'd come in front of the door, and Cy would say, "I don't want to go back by myself," so I'd say, "Okay, I'll walk you home." So I would walk him home back to his place, and then I would say to him, "I really don't want to walk back alone," so we would go back and forth several times, before we had the courage to just stay and go

INTERVIEWER: It was really that edgy

ROSENTHAL: It was. Not so much because I was afraid of actually being accosted, or whatever bad people do to you. It was the mood and the atmosphere of the street that was so off-putting, because it was a very weird kind of place. It was Wall Street, or the surroundings of Wall Street, so that during the day it was immensely peopled. There were hundreds of people every second running from office to office, from the subway to their office, and back again. It was a crowd of people, and an enormous amount of movement. Five o'clock would come and -- *whoosh* -- nothing. Everybody disappeared. There was not a soul. The sun would go down, it would get dark, and in the streets there were cats, stray cats, who were meowing, and you would see the fog coming out of the manholes, creating strange lighting, and imagery -- because there were yellow street lights, so it was jaundiced. There was jaundice, with that fog coming out of the manholes, and those stray cats, and nobody around, no human being around. It was like this for that whole area until midnight; and then the fish market opened on the East River, and, again, millions of trucks, millions of people to buy and sell, and all of this until morning. Then, again, *whoosh* -- everybody goes home around seven, eight o'clock in the morning, and at ten a.m., Wall Street would start up again. So it had all these masks. It was like a player with many masks on their

¹ Speech on June 1, 2006 at MoCA for the "Combine" Show. Ms. Rosenthal has given permission for a copy of the speech to be included in the file.

faces. It was so strange. The feeling was always one not so much a danger as a kind of a mythical strangeness that made you feel uncomfortable.

INTERVIEWER: The way you're depicting it, it sounds as a scene in a 1940s film noir.

ROSENTHAL: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: You're not sure where but there might be danger.

ROSENTHAL: That's right. You're absolutely correct. That's what it felt like. Our little building, of course, was going to be demolished. That's why we were able to get it at very low rent.

INTERVIEWER: Was that on Fulton Street?

ROSENTHAL: No, that was on Pearl.

So the building on Pearl was five stories. I had the top one, and Jap [Jasper Johns] had the one below me. The one on the second floor was a mimeograph printing place, and as I tell it in the story here, they had a *monte-charge*² -- I don't know how you say that in English -- a thing that would carry boxes from the ground floor to the second floor, where they had their business. It was something that was activated simply with a rope, but that rope went all the way to where my loft was, on top, with a huge, um, --

INTERVIEWER: Like a wheel or something.

ROSENTHAL: A wheel -- an enormous, old wooden wheel -- and that reminded me of the Japanese movies of the past, they always showed this scene with the wheel going through water. But at any time of night or day, it would go [sound FX]. Starting to roll... It was this enormous wheel moving, making all that noise.

INTERVIEWER: Was it behind the wall, or could you see it?

ROSENTHAL: No, it was right there. A big hole. There was a hole, half the wheel went into the hole, just like in a stream, in a little flow of water there.

But I had a big event that happened, personally. At the end of '55 my father died in Beverly Hills, and he was here with my mother visiting her family, because they were close, and her family lived here. He died -- he had a bad heart -- he was eighty-one years old. So I got a phone call from my aunt, it was in my loft, I think, or in Jap's, and apparently we were having -- Bob and Jap and I were having our usual tea. We always had this ritual tea. I left to go to the funeral in California, and the memorial, and I was away something like two weeks, and I had left my two cats. My two cats were being taken care of by Fance Stevenson, who was a friend. She was

² [goods lift, hoist. Source: Collins French-English Dictionary]

part of the little group. When I came back, she came to the airport to fetch me, and that's when she told me that one of my cats was missing -- three days and three nights already.

So I was out of my mind with horror. I looked all over the building, and I looked all over the street, and I tried to approach all the people who were on the street and everything else. I looked for her everywhere. On top of the fifth floor was the roof -- and all these places, by the way, you could go in and out of with one of those outdoor stairs.

INTERVIEWER: Like a fire escape.

ROSENTHAL: A fire escape, right. My cats were always playing on the fire escapes, and they would do acrobatics on the railing. It would drive me crazy. They would also go up the stairs, inside, to go onto the roof. That's where they did their pee-pee and their poop. But the roof had these chimneys that were open, and that cat, who was the girl cat, Dibidi she liked to do acrobatics on anything that was high. I was thinking, "Oh, my God!" I realized that some of the chimneys had been blocked with bricks and closed, and I was thinking maybe she fell in one of those, and she is buried alive.

I didn't know what to do. After days of searching, I'm on the roof, and I'm leaning on one of those chimneys, crying for her and for my father both. And I see the drops of my tears falling in this black hole of the chimney, all the way down. I'm like this, crying. I look, and I see like a little green light, way, way at the bottom, and I said, "Dibidi?" And then another little green light, and I realized it was her eyes. She's looking up at me, and meowing. I said, "I'll get you out."

Well, it was a Saturday afternoon. I called the ASPCA, and nobody answered. I called the police, they came hours later, and laughed at me, so I threw them out. I said, "I don't need you. Go away." I figured, just by looking, approximately where she was in the building, at what height. I figured she was probably at the height of the printer, on the second floor. I couldn't reach Bob and Jap. They were probably at the movies. I figured it's me. I've got to do it. So I tore down the door of the printer, and went inside, and saw that the chimney led to a fireplace, that also had been bricked over, or cemented over. I said, "Okay, I've got to open a hole." So I went and got some of my tools, and for hours I was punching away at this chimney. Finally, I got enough of a hole to get my head and one arm to go in. I looked down, and saw that I miscalculated by just maybe five feet. She was lower than that. She's hanging onto -- there was like a way of going up the chimney -- but it was at an angle, and then it went completely vertical, so she was at the top of that angle, hanging on. Later I found out that all her nails were bleeding from trying to hold on, and not fall back. She's just sitting there, and she can't go any further, because it's totally vertical.

So I said, "I'll get you out." So I figured, "What am I going to do?" I made a little elevator for her, with cords, and I tried to send this down, hoping she would get on it, and I could haul her up. But she was too afraid. She couldn't let go. So I realized -- I had read somewhere that you can pull cats by their neck without killing them, but I had never done that.

INTERVIEWER: You had to lasso --

ROSENTHAL: -- lasso the neck, and it doesn't kill them. I'm thinking, "Okay. I have to do that -- do it once, and do it right." So I got a cord, I made a lasso -- I never did anything like this in my life) -- I pulled it down, and after playing with it for a little while, I got it over her head, and I wheeled her up, and -- oh!

INTERVIEWER: What a fantastic story.

ROSENTHAL: She wouldn't even touch my milk and all the food I was putting in front of her, until she had thanked me. She had a way of saying thank you, with her little ass up in the air, and her head down. She was falling over, she was so weak.

INTERVIEWER: Poor baby.

ROSENTHAL: Anyway, that was my understanding of the building --

INTERVIEWER: -- of the building where you lived on Pearl Street.

ROSENTHAL: -- inside out. It was a very interesting street, because the houses were so old. They were almost all brick.

INTERVIEWER: Were a lot of artists living there?

ROSENTHAL: Well, we were the only ones at the time. I think eventually more artists came because they were attracted by who was there. But by the time I left it was still a desert. That whole area, at night, was a desert, and there were very few people.

INTERVIEWER: Did Cy live there at the same time?

ROSENTHAL: Cy lived there, but more uptown than we were. We were further down. He was in one of those little streets. But as I told you, he was within walking distance, but quite a few blocks. He was further up.

INTERVIEWER: What can you tell me about him? I'm not going to have the chance, now³ --

ROSENTHAL: About Cy? He was a gentle giant. He was a beautiful young man, beautiful, as you can see. [She shows a photo on the wall, taken at that period.] I was lucky enough to know all these guys when they were so young; yet, they were all formed in terms of being artists. They knew who they were as artists, and they created art that was absolutely definitive about themselves. He was already doing the writings, and he was already doing objects in a certain way that used materials, found materials, that were very laid-back materials, and he had a very, very small apartment, and I visited it and he showed me what he was working on, and stuff. I was very impressed with his art, and bought one of his sculptures, which I put in my loft in a lovely place.

³ Cy Twombly died July 5, 2011.

So he was in love with Bob; Bob was in love with Jap; I was in love with Jap. It was a mess.
[Chuckles]

INTERVIEWER: I hadn't realized that Cy and Jasper had crossed paths, as it were.

ROSENTHAL: People don't talk about that much, I've noticed. There wasn't an understanding --

INTERVIEWER: They may not know.

ROSENTHAL: Did you say Cy and Bob, or Cy and Jap?

INTERVIEWER: That Cy was in Bob's life at the same time that Jasper was in Bob's life.

ROSENTHAL: Bob was basically shifting from his affections for Cy to his affection for Jap, and Cy was suffering. He had a bad time of it. Then I had the same bad time, because I was also in love with [Jap]. So Cy and I used to cry on each other's shoulders.

INTERVIEWER: Then he ultimately left New York, correct?

ROSENTHAL: He left New York, and he went back to Italy. He had been in Italy with Bob. They had a very nice time of it, where they made very interesting art, and they brought back some of it. Some of it they threw in the Arno.

INTERVIEWER: Right. I read that story. That's a funny story.

ROSENTHAL: So there was that added complication, because we were all with raging hormones walking around New York.

INTERVIEWER: Right. You were all in your twenties, I guess. That's terrific.

ROSENTHAL: Bob was just a little bit older than I was, and I was something like two or three years older than Jap. Jap had this picture taken by Bob. He was something like twenty-three years old. He was very, very young. He was doing those "potato drawings," and he lived in a coldwater flat, very high up, without an elevator, just a little one-room. I visited him there, and he was showing me what he was working on. That's where he did that piece of me, of my face, in plaster. That was on his bed, you know, and I was suffering because the plaster fell in my eyes. I didn't want to stop, because I didn't want to redo the same road. So I was suffering, with my eyes burning from the plaster. It was a beautiful piece. It is now at the Hirshhorn [Museum.]

Do you want to see a picture of it?

INTERVIEWER: I'd love to see a picture of it.

ROSENTHAL: I have a picture I can show you. It was one of the saddest things I did in my life, when I had to get rid of my beautiful pieces.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sure.

ROSENTHAL: But I kept my theatre going, so that was what I wanted.

INTERVIEWER: How did you actually make the acquaintance of Bob?

ROSENTHAL: Well, it was very simple. When I was in high school, I was totally in love with Merce [Cunningham], who was at the time with Martha Graham. I used to go to all the Martha Graham concerts, because I loved dance right off the bat. Then when he left her, he started doing those solo pieces with John [Cage]. I think he had met him at Black Mountain. They started to work together. I went to see those recitals, where Merce was doing solo dance, and John was doing "prepared" piano. [makes squawking noise] [Laughter] And I thought this was the "cat's ass."

When I finished high school, my parents wanted to become Americans, and they figured that since I could become an American automatically because I had gone through high school, that I should do that. It would make it easier for them to become Americans. So they arranged for me to become naturalized -- which I did. Then, right away I was so nostalgic about Paris in those days [that] I wanted to go back to Paris. Then I found out that as a newly naturalized American, I wasn't allowed to go back more than a year at a time. So for eight years I was going back and forth between New York and Paris, a year here, a year there, two years here, one year there. And that's how I got involved with the new theater in Paris and the new art in New York. I was lucky. I was in the right place at the right time, each time.

So in Paris I was taking classes in a theatre school, and Merce and John came to do a master class. I was so thrilled -- here's my idol, and I can do a master class with him. So one of the girls who was also taking classes -- Marianne Praeger who eventually became a member of this company -- Marianne came from French people so she knew a lot of French. The two of us were the only people who could translate for Merce and John because they couldn't speak French. So we became close. We were going around the city doing things and we were translating for them.⁴ When I went back to New York -- and that was one of the years that I had to go back -- I went to Merce for classes. I continued doing dance with him. I eventually became a part of his junior company.

Little by little, I got more and more into their entourage. They had a circle of people who loved them, and followed them everywhere, and did everything they did, and who were very impressed, and very influenced by John especially, as John was philosophically in a certain place, and we were all glommed onto that.

INTERVIEWER: Fresh ideas.

ROSENTHAL: Well, fresh ideas, Zen Buddhism, calligraphy -- the whole shmeer.

I went back to Paris again for a year or two or whatever it was, and then when I came back the last time -- it was in '53 -- I knew, more or less, the people who were in the entourage of Merce

⁴ On 8.31.2011 Rachel Rosenthal added: "That's also when I met Pierre Boulez!"

and John, and there was this new person -- Bob. At first I felt, "What is this stranger doing in here?" Because everybody was very protective of that little group -- since they really were -- the whole thing was different, and completely out of the box for everybody.

Bob was an extraordinary being right from the start. First of all, he had a way about him. He knew who he was from the word go, and he was very, very sure of what he was doing, very sure of himself. He dressed like a dandy. He was beautifully put together. On the other hand, his studio was like the Bowery came home. It was a mess! He worked in this kind of gritty, dirty, detritus debris of work, his work -- garbage thrown out, things found, and everything like that. So there was this interesting double life in a way that he was leading. If he went out anywhere, he looked like -- you know those thin ties that they had?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I was wondering. I saw photographs of Bob from that time, and he seems to be wearing a suit.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, always. Always. When he went out, he had on a suit. He had a tie. His suit was always impeccable, beautiful colors -- elegance personified -- and he was funny, and he was surprising. Everything he said was like, "Whoa! I've never heard that said!" He integrated, beautifully, into the group. He fell right into it; they adopted him with open arms. They were all gay, naturally, but Bob was married, don't forget, at that period, at that time, and he had a boy. A son.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Christopher.

ROSENTHAL: His wife was nowhere in the picture. Very rarely did she appear. I saw her a couple of times, but that was it. They were already splitting.

So that was that. Then I went back to Paris again, and when I came back there was something else going on, which was Jap [Jasper Johns]. Jap was, at the time, working as a salesman at Marlboro Books. He had this job, which was a day job that started late in day, and so he was working late at night. I was beginning, I think, to -- what's the word when you walk behind somebody, and try to follow them?

INTERVIEWER: Trailing?

ROSENTHAL: No, it's a worse word. [Stalking]

INTERVIEWER: I know exactly what you're saying.

ROSENTHAL: So it was me. I was trailing him, like that. I was kind of interested. I didn't know why, I just wanted to see what was going on. I'd see that at night, he is finished with his job, comes out, he locks the door, and there's Bob, doing the same thing I'm doing. [Laughter] So I immediately pull back into the shadows --

INTERVIEWER: That's funny.

ROSENTHAL: -- and watch carefully.

INTERVIEWER: Had you checked Jasper out at the bookstore, or had you met him before?

ROSENTHAL: I always thought of this group as a solar system, with the sun being John, and Merce, also; then there were all these planets revolving around them. And he was like Pluto! He was out in the boonies. But he was beginning to be a planet in the group, thanks to Bob, who was reeling him in.

INTERVIEWER: He was in orbit...

ROSENTHAL: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: Was he the same as Bob? Outgoing?

ROSENTHAL: He was just the opposite.

INTERVIEWER: Really.

ROSENTHAL: He was Mr. Mystery Man. He was so pulled in, he was so hidden, he was so mysterious. But I think that was part of his charm -- because that's very attractive. You want to be able to break that glass, a big glass like Duchamp's work. You want to break it, and see what's underneath.

So yes. I had seen him at Marlboro's. I was always peripheral but there, somehow. So was Sari Dienes, whom you know about, of course. With Sari I had another relationship, because I was taking classes, first with Morris Davidson, who was a painter, who was also a teacher. He was not a good painter, but a good teacher. I took some classes with him. He was on 55th Street or something like that, and she was on 57th Street. She had a studio in Carnegie Hall, also. She was also, at the time, doing -- what do you call it? -- I have it in here [points to head] -- old age makes me forget words. It drives me crazy. When you put paper over something that's --

INTERVIEWER: A collage?

ROSENTHAL: Rubbings.

INTERVIEWER: Rubbings. Okay.

ROSENTHAL: She was doing rubbings. She did a lot of rubbings of those ancient little stones in cemeteries of people who died. Then when she was finished with that, she also started with manholes in Manhattan.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, how interesting.

ROSENTHAL: Yes -- because there are a lot of interesting manholes. She would do them at three in the morning, four in the morning, when there were hardly any cars. But she was doing it on Japanese paper, but there was always a breeze, so it was hard to keep the paper down on the manholes, so she always had a bunch of people helping her. She would insist on having the

boys, and some girls, come with her at three in the morning, and we were all dying of sleeplessness but we dare not say no to Sari. So we would sort of be this tribe that was going through all these streets, setting up our paper, and she would do her rubbings, and walk on.

So one day she invited everybody to her studio, and by that time I was renting her studio in the morning -- because she needed the money, and I needed to leave my class because I'd had it up to here with being a student, and go and do my own painting, which I did. So I was invited one evening by her -- it was wine and biscuits or something like that -- it was a whole bunch of younger artists, of which there was Bob, and Jap, and me, and a few other people. So we all had a little bit of wine, and we were kind of happy, and suddenly -- much to my great surprise -- Jap makes a play for me. I knew he was gay, and I was totally aware of what was going on -- I figured that he was trying to break away from Bob, and he's doing it through me. So I was aware of what it was all about. It didn't help. I fell in love with him.

INTERVIEWER: It's what makes us human.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, man. I was just crazy over him.

INTERVIEWER: It was the mystery? It was the mystery of Jasper that was interesting to you? You were talking about the Duchamp "break the bottle."

ROSENTHAL: It was everything.

INTERVIEWER: Charming?

ROSENTHAL: He had a way about him that was very special. He was beautiful, first of all -- as you can see.⁵ He was beautiful, he was very hidden -- and one wanted to break that at all costs. I don't know. I was in awe of these young men who had so much to give as artists, and it was, for me, a kind of gratefulness that he would consider even using me. [Laughter] Of all people. So I fell for it.

I had a very pleasant summer. My parents were away, and we went to my parents' double-decker apartment on Central Park South which is now in the Trump Tower. We had a very pleasant time. Then I made the big mistake of telling him that I was in love with him. I should never have done that -- because I was like -- snap - cut off. It was very sad. I was devastated.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes!

ROSENTHAL: But I knew what the situation really was.

INTERVIEWER: It doesn't mean we can't be game-changers.

ROSENTHAL: Well, there you go. So that was my relationship with them. And that didn't prevent me from being very, very good friends with Bob.

⁵ Ms. Rosenthal has a photograph of Jasper Johns at her desk.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see them both together? My only understanding of their relation is that Hermine Ford -- Jack Tworkov's daughter -- told me that when she was a kid, growing up, her mother would say, "Who do you want to have for Thanksgiving dinner," or Christmas dinner or whatever, and she and her sister would say, "Bob and Jasper, Bob and Jasper," because they were so much fun.

ROSENTHAL: True. True. They were very, very funny people. They had a peculiar sense of humor. They were their best audience. They would say something, and then just guffaw, laugh their asses off.

INTERVIEWER: Crack each other up?

ROSENTHAL: Totally. But they even did it to their own jokes. [Laughter] They had a very strong -- obviously -- understanding of each other, and they loved each other. And, you know, since Jap was right under me in the building, I was pretty much aware of their sleeping together in the little bed, and their being together, and their going off somewhere -- I don't know where, maybe the movies -- so they had a very strong relationship. Then, when I moved to L.A., after some time, there was a big show of Jap's work. I think it was in Pasadena, if I'm not mistaken.

INTERVIEWER: Ferus Gallery, 1960. Something like that?

ROSENTHAL: I don't know if it was the Ferus Gallery, because I would have remembered -- although all the people from the Ferus were --

INTERVIEWER: -- ended up in Pasadena.

ROSENTHAL: Maybe Pasadena was where the feast was, where they had the big buffet and everything -- I remember that we had a date on La Cienega, in one of the -- I think it was a café or a bar, I'm not sure -- and we were talking together. I said to him, "You know, sometimes I really regret that I left New York, because so much of interest has been happening there since I've gone. And here it's a desert; there's very little happening. And he said, "Don't. Don't be upset. It was terrible." So I figured this was at the time he was breaking up with Bob; this was a time when his whole life was just crumbling. Because Bob -- from my understanding, I may be wrong -- fell in love with one of Merce's dancers, and obviously moved his affections from Jap to this other guy. And I think that it was really hard on Jap -- and Jap was not the kind of person who shows emotion. So if he said something like that to me, I figured that was really something.

INTERVIEWER: Heartbreaking. You had said something [in the MOCA speech] about Bob -- and I wonder if you could say it about both of them -- that he was highly ambitious, and in a business kind of way, quite competitive. You said he actually plotted the galleries where he [Bob] wanted to show.

ROSENTHAL: Absolutely. Absolutely. He plotted everything out. He was very, very smart, and he presented himself in a way that didn't show that side of him, except to some very few people. At one point, I was buying something from him, and I tried to Jew him down, and he

wrote me a scathing letter -- because he thought that I had the money to pay for it, and that I should be paying for it. He made me feel so ashamed that I not only paid the entire amount, but I even added some.

But that's the way he was. He really took the reins, and he managed his development and his life, and who he was working with, and what gallery, and how much money he was going to ask, and he did it. I would hear him talking to people who would visit the work in the gallery, and were mostly totally ignorant of what they were seeing, and he would talk the hell out of them; they wouldn't know what hit them. He was just so right-on about his own work. He was telling them what they should see when they looked at his work.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really? What did they say? What did *he* say? That's fascinating.

ROSENTHAL: The kind of thing he would say was almost incomprehensible. I knew him well, and *I* couldn't understand what he was saying. So the people were listening to all this cant, and he would just embroider, and embroider, and embroider, and tell them how he came to this, and how he came to that, and why he did this, and why he did that, but in ways that didn't really say anything that could be really taken and understood. It was all stuff that was as mysterious as could be and so people were titillated, and they wanted to know more, hear more, and look at it with new eyes. He would really reel them in like fish. It was really interesting to see. I couldn't believe it. I would just stand there, listening, and thinking, "Yeah, well, *learn*, Rachel." And I never did. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: It's a whole other side of him, that calculating "salesmanship," really.

ROSENTHAL: Totally. Totally. But also knowing how to make theatre out of it. Because he was very theatrical, and he knew he was theatrical. He presented that as a persona that was very strong.

INTERVIEWER: That's an insight I've never heard anybody speak about. When you were talking about Bob speaking, I remember that I read one of the Smithsonian Archive of American Arts oral histories with Bob. And I thought, "Well, Bob Rauschenberg -- it's really difficult to diagram one of his sentences," because there's this stream of consciousness, that I observed, in the way he spoke. Somehow, it made total sense, but not in a way that you could say his thought is going like *this*. It was quite beautiful.

ROSENTHAL: Well, there were two aspects, you see. One aspect is what I call the theatrical, where he's wearing a mask; his hair is done; his costume is beautiful; he has this stream of consciousness, which is poetic, and very mysterious, also. He talks about what you're looking at, and makes us open our eyes in a different way. Then he is the man who goes home and figures things out; and, I'm sure, writes them down, in all his *caps*. [Laughs]

INTERVIEWER: When you were there in the early '50s, in '53, what immediately comes to mind is *Minutiae*.

ROSENTHAL: That was a little bit after I left. He was working up to it. He had already done the *Bed*.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see that?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. Definitely.

Bob did the *Bed* when I was still there. He was going into combines, and the first monochrome collages began with black, then red & white. And Jap did a lot of newspaper collages that stuck out sometimes in 3D. They were just lacquered at first, then he used paint of one color. My Mother bought a little green monochrome for \$40-ish if I remember correctly! By the time he got to the targets etc. he had done a lot of smaller collages.

He [Jasper Johns] had a lot of "Targets", and he did this wonderful piece for me -- which I loved -- because he had done a cross, which was destroyed when he destroyed everything else. Then I forced him to make a Star of David for me, in the same way that he did the cross.

INTERVIEWER: There was that religious part of his background....

ROSENTHAL: It was, I assume. But it was the only time I ever saw him do anything remotely religious, and he wouldn't have done two since he'd already destroyed one) unless I forced him to do a Star of David. It was such a beautiful piece.

How did we get on that subject?

INTERVIEWER: *Minutiae* -- You were saying the works that you had seen of his ...

ROSENTHAL: He had already started to do the canvases that were covered with newspaper collage in one color.

INTERVIEWER: The "Red" series.

ROSENTHAL: No, I'm talking about Jap, now. With Bob, when I first came -- he was into the "Black" series, and some "White," and in the "White" series, he was really funny because big canvasses, covered with white -- period. At least the "Black" ones and the "Red" ones were paintings.

INTERVIEWER: Right. They had some texture.

ROSENTHAL: People were absolutely dismayed. [Laughter] And he was saying, "You know, this is real real art, real nature art because when the sun changes its course, it's seen through the windows of the gallery, and it changes the color of the painting, the white painting. Also, when people walk around, their shadows are making new shapes on the paintings." So he had a whole explanation for those paintings -- which were the emperor's new clothes, to me.

So he had those, but mainly he did those wonderful, wonderful objects when he came back from Italy. He brought some with him, and some he made in New York. They were just beautiful objects, and I was in love with them.

INTERVIEWER: Were they ever in a gallery? Were they ever shown?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. The Stable Gallery. The Stable Gallery, which used to be for horses, and it used to smell of horse dung -- he and Cy had a show together.

INTERVIEWER: Oh! When they returned from Italy?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. So he had all these things which he called "fetici," which is Italian for fetishes, and Cy had his little sculptures of wood.

So the two of them were shown by -- I forget her name, who had the Stable Gallery.

INTERVIEWER: Was it Betty Parsons? Eleanor Ward?⁶

ROSENTHAL: I think so, yes. I'm not sure.

ROSENTHAL: So he was working on these things. He had boxes also, specific boxes, of which I owned a few. And he was working -- oh. He did a big painting which was in a frame on the wall, and it was all earth. You had to water it every day, and then grass grew. That was the painting -- so I was thinking, "What a thing to have a painting that requires to be watered every day."

INTERVIEWER: He did say he wanted his art to be interactive.

ROSENTHAL: Well, it sure was. So he had that. Then he got very much into the black paintings, and those were beautiful collages, and the paint was all different. Some of it was very oily and shiny; some of it was very dull in surface, and different blacks were coming through the painting.

So he did quite a few of those; then he got into the reds, the red paintings -- which I also bought, a beautiful one. What I talk about in this talk [at MOCA] was he was so funny, because he was very competitive, and he was going to the Cedar Bar a lot, with all the old Abstract Expressionists. He was already the bad boy, and he was fighting against "Ab-Ex."

INTERVIEWER: They had taken notice of him. They didn't like it, but they had taken notice of him.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes. Definitely. So he was friends with Tworlov, and Tworlov was making red paintings, but they were kind of gentle reds. Bob was like a rooster walking around saying,

⁶ Eleanor Ward founded the Stable Gallery in 1953.

"I can do better reds than Tworikov. My red is better than his red." It was true, of course.
[Laughs]

INTERVIEWER: How funny.

ROSENTHAL: Yes, he was very competitive.

INTERVIEWER: So what was your response to the *Bed*? Everybody seemed to think it was so shocking. Did you have that response?

ROSENTHAL: I was always amazed that people were shocked with his work, or didn't understand it. Because, to me, it was like I had done it. I was so close in feeling about all his work. I felt so totally in sync with everything he did. I always felt that if I had really worked in a studio, seriously, by myself, I would have come up with that kind of work.

INTERVIEWER: Really. With that approach.

ROSENTHAL: With that approach, and with that understanding. So I never felt surprised, or horrified, or dumbfounded, or anything like that. I felt totally in harmony with everything he did. I thought the *Bed* was a wonderful piece. It was sufficiently disgusting -- but then most of his work was, in one way or another. I always was thinking -- you know, it takes guts to take a perfectly good -- what do you call these things that the peasant women did, the covers. What do you call those?

INTERVIEWER: A quilt.

ROSENTHAL: Yes. To take a perfectly good quilt, and do that to it. Because I had friends who collected quilts, and who treated them like babies, carefully and all that. Then to see it that done to -- it was like, "Whoa!"

INTERVIEWER: And he said that he didn't have anything else to paint on --

ROSENTHAL: But this is how he was. He would put you off-track, and make you think that you had found out something special about him.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if you would reflect for me on what, at that pivotal time in the art world, with these two men who so changed it -- Bob and Jasper -- what their conversations were about work -- their work, your work. Were they influential, influencing each of you, influencing each other?

ROSENTHAL: I was not an influence on anybody, because I wasn't really an artist yet. I was doing sculptures with tar, and they were very generous in what they were telling me -- saying that they were amazed that out of nowhere, I was able to understand what they were doing to the point of creating my own version of it. So that was good feedback but it wasn't anything that I could really pin on them. They were pinning it on me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think they had conversations about each other's work?

ROSENTHAL: They had a lot of conversations, but I had more conversations with them separately. I think they talked to each other alot. They worked together. I saw them working together on the windows, when they were making money that way. I saw them doing the blueprints, the big blueprints and all of that with lights.

INTERVIEWER: So beautiful.

ROSENTHAL: Yes, really gorgeous.

So I saw them doing that, and being very technical about what they were doing -- and earning that way -- but there was always a buzz of conversation between them; between them and John; between John and Lou Harrison; between Merce and everybody else.. And at the same time, it seemed to me that they were remarkably even in their weight, those two boys, because even though Jap wasn't yet who he was when he first met Bob, Bob, I think, put him on the right track, in the sense that he saw some of what he did like the potato drawings, and he said, "You've got to move. You've got to get a loft. You've got to be an artist. And you work with me, and we'll make money to sustain us, and we'll both be artists."

And so Bob really lifted him out of the ordinary, of just getting a nine-to-five. Bob really did - pushed him into the world of being an artist, and what that meant. But Jap was very different from Bob. He, for instance, was reading a lot, writing poetry, being influenced by the books of African writers, for instance. And Bob, it was the comics. He would read the comics while he was painting, and listen to rock and roll, and drinking beer. Then he'd go out and be a gentleman -- a count, a baron.

INTERVIEWER: This is in the pre-television era.

ROSENTHAL: Yes. Definitely.

INTERVIEWER: Listening to rock and roll on the radio.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes. I was listening to the blues all night, and crying while doing my tar sculptures, with my cats looking at me. My cats would sit on the table and look at me and "Poor girl." [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Funny. That's funny.

Stalk. [The word Ms. Rosenthal wanted to use earlier in the conversation]

ROSENTHAL: Stalking is correct. That's what I did. And you know, every time I get an email from [Jasper] -- which happens once a year, maybe -- I get so happy. It makes me happy all day long. I just adore him -- still.⁷

⁷ On 8.31.11 Ms. Rosenthal writes "p.s. we correspond more often now!"

INTERVIEWER: Isn't it great to have friends that go back a long way, and you know them at their core, and from that core period of time?

ROSENTHAL: I only wish I had had a more continuous conversation by email, but I know him. If he answers once in a blue moon, it's special.

INTERVIEWER: Exactly. I've never met him.

ROSENTHAL: Well, darling, be my guest. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: I know -- and he's looking at me. He looks about fourteen in that photograph.

ROSENTHAL: This one? [points to photograph on her wall] No, he was twenty-three, I think.

INTERVIEWER: You know, Kirk Varnedoe was going to write a book on Bob, and Jasper, and Cy, as three painters from the South. I assume he was going to be talking both about the new directions in art, but also the place of place in their art. Then he tragically died so soon, so early -- Kirk Varnedoe -- and he never did do it.

ROSENTHAL: Did he know them well at that time? I don't remember their mentioning him.

INTERVIEWER: You know, I don't think it ever stopped anybody. [Laughter]

ROSENTHAL: I guess you're right.

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask if you and Bob ever talked about [Antonin] Artaud.

ROSENTHAL: You know, we had a very continuous discussion -- not discussion, but he was very curious when I came back from Paris, and told him about Theatre of the Absurd, which was beginning to flower. We talked about Artaud because my whole life was revolutionized by Artaud. There was a very nice piece of work by Jean Genet called *Les Bonnes*, which was *The Maids* [in English], and I was supposed to direct, and the producer was Julie Bovasso, who was a wonderful artist, I mean actor, but impossible to work with. She basically wouldn't let me do what I wanted to do, and what I wanted to do was to have Bob design the piece. I said to him, "I want it done in an aquarium, the whole thing is happening in an aquarium," and he started to work immediately. He was doing objects that were really amazing. I couldn't continue working with her, because she was putting obstacles in my way, every step.

So we didn't do that. But in addition to that event -- which I'm sure was a big a disappointment to him as it was to me -- we had long, long talks -- I had the hammock that was attached, right next to that big wheel I told you about. I remember sitting with him in the hammock, and me sitting next to him, and talking about theatre -- because he was really interested in my experiences in Paris with the Theatre of the Absurd, and the kind of work that was being done at that time -- which was not shown here at all, and it was really new for him to conceive of, even though he had begun to do performance art at Black Mountain.

INTERVIEWER: At Black Mountain. But when he started doing work with the Judson Group --

ROSENTHAL: That was later.

INTERVIEWER: That was later, I know, but do you see a connection between Artaud and that?

ROSENTHAL: Everything is a connection. I don't think that things just happen.

INTERVIEWER: Point taken.

ROSENTHAL: I think that it's like different chicks coming out of different eggs. But they've still got the same mother who puts all the eggs in -- so I think he was influenced, of course, both by Black Mountain and by what we talked about because he was asking questions. He wanted to know, in detail, what I had experienced in Paris, what I had seen. Because none of it was translated. *The Theater and It's Double* was not translated by M.C. [Richards] until 1957. So I was already gone.

INTERVIEWER: You were gone. Yes. Exactly.

ROSENTHAL: So in order to understand Artaud, you'd better start with that book. So Bob started with asking me questions, which I answered.

INTERVIEWER: Did he ever talk about Black Mountain College, and that experience? Or was that, at a certain point, behind him?

ROSENTHAL: I don't remember us talking about it too much. I remember that I knew about it, so I would assume I found out one way or another, about the parachute, and the roller skates, and everything.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that was later.

ROSENTHAL: That was later.

INTERVIEWER: That was later, but I was thinking that you would have been a fine addition to Black Mountain College.

ROSENTHAL: I wasn't even aware that it existed.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I don't think many people were.

ROSENTHAL: And the point is, also, that I was so divided between Paris and New York, that I couldn't -- every time I felt I was putting roots in one of the places, I had to --

INTERVIEWER: That must have been difficult.

ROSENTHAL: It was very difficult, yes. Very difficult, because it really came in the way of my development as an artistic person.

INTERVIEWER: When you relocated to Los Angeles, did that turn out to be a good thing for you? I know at the time it must have been heartbreaking.

ROSENTHAL: Well, it was very difficult, but I immediately got involved with the Ferus, and I knew all the boys. I knew, of course, [Ed] Keinholz, and I knew what's-his-name, the other director.

INTERVIEWER: I only know that there was an Irving Blum and a Walter Hopps.

ROSENTHAL: Walter was the first one I knew, then came Irving, who, before he got involved with the Ferus, was a student of mine in my workshop. Yes. He was a salesman of furniture at the time, and he took my workshop. [Laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Fantastic.

ROSENTHAL: That was funny.

INTERVIEWER: Fantastic.

ROSENTHAL: So I knew that whole gang of people, and they actually would come to my place to see the works of Bob and Jap that I had lying around because I had such a collection. And this is how they learned about the new kind of art that was happening on the other side of the country. Because they didn't know. They hadn't seen any of it, except with me.

INTERVIEWER: That's just fascinating. I've been asking people -- that's been a missing link -- how is it that people -- I talked to somebody today who said he'd seen, in the late '50s, photographs in a magazine -- but they learned from you.

ROSENTHAL: They saw the real thing -- on the walls and off the walls. And they would come and see my theatre, which happened to be on the street, and behind the theatre was where I lived -- with my seventeen cats by then.

INTERVIEWER: Seventeen?

ROSENTHAL: So they would come and see the theatre -- which was pure improvisation -- and then they would all come to the back, in my place, and bring bottles, and drink a little bit, and so on and so forth, and then go home. But in my place, they would see all these objects.

INTERVIEWER: I guess, during that time, Merce's company is traveling around the country.

ROSENTHAL: They were growing, and growing, and growing.

INTERVIEWER: Is their path bringing them to Los Angeles, so that you're hooking back up with them?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I would see them, of course, but they would usually just come in, rehearse like mad, do their piece, and leave. and, and leave.

INTERVIEWER: And move on to the next town.

ROSENTHAL: They were growing.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. With Bob as lighting designer. He had a great time, I think, with that.

ROSENTHAL: And then -- it's interesting that Bob, when he left working with Merce, in came Jap, working with Merce.

INTERVIEWER: Merce was extraordinary in his sense of how he wanted people to collaborate.

ROSENTHAL: Work together. Everybody is separate, and then it comes in...

INTERVIEWER: Then it comes together.

ROSENTHAL: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see Bob when he was at Gemini? Did you all get a chance to get together?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. Actually, it was funny because he was so sweet, and he was drunk. Actually, I think that Katy [Noonan] was with me at the time, and she was witness to this getting together. And anytime I saw Merce, or Bob, or any of them, they were so nice to me. They seemed happy to see me --

INTERVIEWER: Of course.

ROSENTHAL: -- and I was delighted. Bob was adorable -- and drunk. What can I say? I don't know how to deal with drunk people. I have no idea.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Exactly.

Whenever your name comes up, people are sending fireworks in the sky. I can imagine that you have quite the fan club.

ROSENTHAL: That's interesting.

INTERVIEWER: It's true.

ROSENTHAL: I was always amazed, you know -- I never had a sense that I was a great artist, but I loved doing what I did, and I was always amazed at the audiences who came. I always had

a full house, and so many people who have worked with me and who took my workshops, years later, come to me, if they see me, or write me, and say, "You changed my life."

INTERVIEWER: I'm sure.

ROSENTHAL: I always feel that what I teach is the culprit -- that's the force that changes people's lives -- and I have been lucky enough to fall in with it, and to understand it, and to be able to put it out so that people can absorb it.

INTERVIEWER: I think that -- I don't know if this is the intention -- but it seemed to me that there were eight men and women who believed in their own bodies on that stage -- which is an awfully powerful gift to have.

ROSENTHAL: Well, I'll tell you something. One of the most important things, I think, about my teaching is that I always try to build up the person, and never humiliate them, or never tell them, "You can't do this," or, "Let's forget it, go do something else," or whatever. So many people say that to students, and destroy them. It's totally first of all unnecessary; secondly, it creates just the opposite of what you want. You want to teach because you want people to learn positive good things. If you, at the same time, just put them under your thumb and push, they're not going to do any of that. They're going to be totally discouraged --

INTERVIEWER: -- cowering in the corner.

ROSENTHAL: Yes -- miserable, and not wanting to look any further, because it's too painful. But if you tell them, "This is weak, you must strengthen that," and, "You did that other thing beautifully," and always acknowledge the good stuff -- that's what makes people want to do more work.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely.

ROSENTHAL: But I've seen so many students who are destroyed by teachers, and what do teachers gain from that, I wonder. You know?

INTERVIEWER: I don't know.

ROSENTHAL: I don't either.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I am going to thank you so much, and ask if I can come back at some point, if I have more questions -- or just visit.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, sure. With pleasure.

INTERVIEWER: I would like that. I would like that very much.

[End of Interview]