

**Interview with PAUL SCHIMMEL**

**Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles**

**Interview by KAREN THOMAS**

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Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates. RRFA 08.  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

PAUL SCHIMMEL: I just think they're such a great group of folks. I think Thomas [Buehler] is wonderful. He has confidence when he works with objects. He doesn't "problematize" situations as some conservators can do. He's comfortable, physically, manipulating things. And David [White], he was always saying, "Oh, I don't know --," but, ultimately, he could not have been more positive.

KAREN THOMAS: He's the best.

SCHIMMEL: Yes. He was really fantastic to work with. Now who has brought you in? What is the purpose of all this?

THOMAS: About a year ago, Don Saff called me up, and he said, "Karen, the Trustees -- several of us have been sitting around -- we're really anxious to have an oral history project done on Bob. I think it was Bennet [Grutman], and Bill Goldston, and Don, and Darryl [Pottorf], and they said, "Yes, but who should do it?" And they all looked at each other -- as I'm told -- and said, "Karen Thomas."

So Don called me up and said, "You want to do this?" I'd done a show for PBS --

SCHIMMEL: Well, gee, that's fantastic. That's probably the only thing they've ever agreed on, thus far. [Laughter] You must be amazing!

THOMAS: You don't mind if we edit this, do you?

But I had done a documentary for PBS many years earlier, about Bob. Bob liked it quite well. This is a little outside of what I normally do, but it's being very interesting to go around and talk to a lot of people. And the idea is that, in my mind, anyhow, fifty years down the road, thirty years down the road, there is going to be another Calvin Tomkins, who is going to want to write about Bob Rauschenberg. So, whatever I can do to collect information that can be in a repository for that person -- or for anybody between now and then, who's writing on Bob.

SCHIMMEL: Are you going to do anything with this material in terms of turning it over to the Archives of American Art, or to some other -- ? Where is it going?

THOMAS: It's going to be lodged in Lafayette Street, at 381. At some point, I think it would be really quite lovely if there were some kind of oral history interchange between Archives of American Art --

SCHIMMEL: That's the most likely place.

THOMAS: Yes. Exactly. They have quite a few interviews at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. They have all of Calvin Tomkins' interviews.

SCHIMMEL: Oh. He gave them to them. Interesting.

THOMAS: Yes. Audios. So I've listened to quite a lot of them, and those are really helpful. I think it's a really good idea to keep all the information, or get all the information that you want to understand, in one location. So I'm hoping that MoMA and the Rauschenberg Archive can agree that what Tomkins has done with Bob can also be --

SCHIMMEL: What years were those interviews done?

THOMAS: I think he started recording them in the '90s.

SCHIMMEL: So late.

THOMAS: Yes, late. And they have a whole lot of paper archives, too, from Tomkins. But it was so much fun to listen to Bob. That's what I really loved. I went on line and listened to the audio that you all posted up there, and it was just delightful to hear his voice.

SCHIMMEL: It could not have been more sweet and generous, working with him. He really, really, was a doll.

THOMAS: I could tell from that interview -- because I've seen Bob do interviews in those situations before, and he's not comfortable, and he clams up. I thought your audience got to see --

SCHIMMEL: -- a very generous --

THOMAS: -- a very funny, witty, bright guy, which they may or may not have expected.

SCHIMMEL: And you know what? At that time, in his health and his life, it's not something that didn't take a real effort. I mean, he had to make a concerted effort to do that.

THOMAS: Yes. When did you all first meet?

SCHIMMEL: Oh, god, I had met him years earlier. He wouldn't even remember. But when I was a curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston -- my first job -- which was in the '70s, he had been very generous when the Museum was flooded. He gave us a work to auction off. And, of course, he had a special connection with Texas. We had met many years ago in my

Texas days. I then really first got to know him better, not that well but better, when I came to MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art], which was about twenty-one years ago, and we were in the process of implementing a plan to conserve all the *Combines* in MOCA's collection, and he had been consulted with on a number of occasions, and very helpful. There was a disagreement between myself and our head registrar about an aspect of the conservation of the *Untitled (Man With the White Shoes)*. It came down to something quite simple, but it was perplexing to me where we were going and I was concerned that we were going to ... There was a very significant tear --actually, a couple of tears-- that had occurred to this very sheer fabric that lines the sides --

THOMAS: Oh, on the interior.

SCHIMMEL: -- of the *Untitled (Man With the White Shoes)*, the lower area. This had occurred and was well documented at the time of the loan to the Venice [Biennale] exhibition. It had never really been repaired, and was quite fragmentary. The conservators had come up with a plan, which was to preserve the original piece, and sandwich it between two other pieces of material. I kind of hated it. I said, "Well, let's talk to the artist about it," because it was, to me, very dense, hard to see through.

So I expressed all of this to Bob -- that I was really concerned that you couldn't see through it -- and he looks at it, and the conservator was there. He goes, "Well, Bob, we talked about that this would be the best way to stabilize it." And he goes, "Paul, I like their plan. You're wrong." [Laughs] And I said, "Okay. I'm glad you're completely clear about it." I go, "Bob, it's darker. You can't really see through it. Your original intention should be sheer. Maybe it would be better just to repair it, and even leave it with the tear." And he goes, "I don't think so." And the registrar was very cute, and very beaming. He goes over and kind of pinches her cheeks, and I go, "Oh, Bob. What can I say?" [Laughter]

It was a funny situation. On the other hand, I found, for whatever reason, Bob, he would see things, he would make a decision, and he was very comfortable, it seemed, making it. He was quite generous, and all politics aside, if he thought that was the better way, that was the better way, and that's the way it was going to be.

I had tried to get this on the schedule from almost the very beginning, when I first got here.

THOMAS: The *Combine* show? A *Combine* show?

SCHIMMEL: The *Combine* show.

THOMAS: It's a beautiful --

SCHIMMEL: It was a great catalogue and a beautiful -- and it really had come -- and I'm turning away from you because I'm looking for a publication called *Hand-Painted Pop* --

THOMAS: Oh. I don't know it.

SCHIMMEL: -- which was among the very, very, very first exhibitions I did when I got here. It was in no small part -- obviously due to the Panza Collection [Count Giuseppe Panza] -- and to unique attributes dealing with early Pop Art, but also the great Rauschenbergs. I'm going to grab the catalogue.

THOMAS: I'd love to see it.

SCHIMMEL: It was the first really big show that I started working [on] when I got here.

THOMAS: So you came here when? In 1990?

SCHIMMEL: Nineteen-ninety, yes. So in ninety-one, I was well working on this exhibition, and it was the exhibition that explored the formative years of Pop Art, between 1955, and ended in 1962, at the point when everyone said, "Oh, there *is* such a thing as Pop Art. It seemed like that was --

THOMAS: That's a good bookend.

SCHIMMEL: And it was a good way, also -- things moved from a more kind, gestural approach, to a more mechanical approach, and even people like [Roy] Lichtenstein and [Andy] Warhol -- they started doing all their mechanical moves and Rauschenberg moved from, obviously, the Combines to doing the first of his screenprints, the silk-screen paintings.

So it was sort of a special period, and I got to know him a little bit while working on that. Clearly, Rauschenberg, [Cy] Twombly, and [Jasper] Johns were among the real centerpieces of this exhibition, but it included eighteen artists, and it traveled to the Whitney [Museum of American Art], and to New York. So we talked about it at that time. At the conclusion of that exhibition, I then approached Bob and said, "Do you know who I would really like to do? -- a *Combine* show. Frankly, I don't think he was that interested but, more importantly, Walter [Hopps] -- I'd been sort of friendly with him for a very, very long time. Walter had his early-work show --

THOMAS: I saw it.

SCHIMMEL: -- and it Walter said, "No, no, no, you can't do this. You've got to wait in line," kind of thing. It was like, "My early-work show is coming up, and then there's the silk-screen show that Roni [Feinstein] did over -- "

THOMAS: -- at the Whitney.

SCHIMMEL: And I said, "Well, great. So this is sort of the in-between show. We'll do it." I don't think Bob was that interested in it. It's funny, but -- we'll talk about this later -- but I came to understand, with time, that like most artists, you always live in the present. They believe in a huge interest in what you did ten years ago, or five years ago. You're interested in what you're doing tomorrow and the next day. That's what being an artist is all about. And Bob is very much a person who very much lives in the present. He's very energetic, very dynamic. But I

also realized that, in some funny way, Bob is a very jealous lover. He doesn't want to share even himself with a lot of kind of -- he's *it*, and it's him right now. And these works, although they were not the fast and furious sellers that the Johnses were early on -- and he didn't really get the kind of recognition for them until he had essentially finished that body of work; it wasn't really until Europe, and Venice, specifically, that he really got the kind of recognition -- but they became so famous that they were the children that became more famous than the parent that made them, and I think he was always a little bit, "Why do they want to talk about the *Combines*? You know? He was jealous of their privileged place, even maybe more privileged than Bob himself.

So he would say things like, "I don't think I need a *Combine* show" kind of thing. He was a little ambivalent. I don't know if it was Walter or if it was Bob, but I could never really get the proper "Okay, I'm on board. I will work with you on this." And you know, as a curator, I can't -- I work with artists -- I love working with artists. I'm not going to do something like this major show without his real sense of both engagement and commitment to it.

It had been indicated, after the early work show that I would be next. I re-approached Bob again and this was at some point, in, let's say, the later '90s, that sort of thing -- mid- to late '90s --

THOMAS: So we've had the Corcoran [Museum of Art] show, we've had the Whitney show, and we've had his ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange] show now.

SCHIMMEL: Yes. The Corcoran show -- and I thought, "Oh, I'm next." Then Walter said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no. We're now going to do the big Guggenheim [Museum of Art] show.

THOMAS: Oh, my gosh.

SCHIMMEL: That was like, "You guys got to be kidding me." And they go, "Oh, no. This is really the big show, the big show of his lifetime. It's going to be the big survey and we're going to have everything, and the *Combines* and everything else." Walter said, "Well, you know, this is what Bob wants." And I'm sure it was. So I was really, oh, wow. And kind of, I think, after that -- and again, we were good lenders to the show, and we never pulled a MoMA on them and said "Well, gee, we thought we were next and we're not going to lend you anything." We were very cooperative, etc. But it was really after Walter passed away that [laughs] -- and I remember -- I was quite friendly with Walter, and the night he got this award from Bard College -- which I had gotten [earlier] about curatorial work -- we went out and we were drinking, and I said, "Walter, this is it. I'm not asking you for your blessings anymore. I'm up *next*." "Oh. Okay." And he passed away not long after that. So I re-approached Bob.

THOMAS: And that's who you go to.... You don't speak to David [White], ....

SCHIMMEL: It was through David.

THOMAS: It was through David. It opened the door. Then did you go ask him in person?

SCHIMMEL: I did. We went and talked about it, and it was a correspondence... . But also, David said "Oh, he's really wondering whether you can get the works." That was always the thrill of the thing. By this time, I had gotten a sense that if I could line things up ... . From the get-go Ileana [Sonnabend] had always been [supportive] – and I had known her for thirty years. She's got the largest collection outside of MOCA, and she had always said, "I will lend to you." And she did. She came through with every single thing I asked for.

THOMAS: Wonderful.

SCHIMMEL: When we talked, I had said, "I have got those two elements -- MOCA and Ileana -- that's a really good beginning." He was hesitant, frankly, to say yes unless it really would be a truly substantial representation that would be done.

THOMAS: Sure.

SCHIMMEL: I still think he had his misgivings, in a way. He would say, "I don't know if anyone really needs to see more *Combines*. And I said, "Well, the truth is, there hasn't really been a *Combine* show since the Jewish Museum show -- which wasn't a *Combine* show, but since it was your early work, that was it. That was the best *Combine*.... ." I said, "You know, people celebrate the early works," which I thought it was a really fascinating show -- the de Menil exhibition. And I said, "And the silk-screen exhibition that Roni [Feinstein] did -- people realized that you were there really right at the same time. You established the chronology vis-à-vis people like Warhol and Lichtenstein, in terms of you painting mechanicals. They got that. But frankly, this is the heart. When people think 'Robert Rauschenberg,' it's vague. It's not all been put together. You may have seen it enough." And he said, "Well, basically, if you can get the goods," and that's how it started.

THOMAS: How do you go about selecting? How many *Combines* are there? There are something like 150 in your catalogue ....?

SCHIMMEL: Yes, we ended up counting -- and we were pretty good. I never called it a catalogue raisonné of the *Combines*, because nobody wants to get sued for having left things out.

THOMAS: Right. But it's really quite expansive.

SCHIMMEL: It is -- and we did not do what some -- I said this to him from the beginning. I said, "Look, I'm going to not use the book to try to make the exhibition better. I'm not going to say you can't be in the book if you don't lend. We're going to start with a very generous approach, and say, "This catalogue is going to be *the* comprehensive catalogue of all the *Combines* and we will hope that people will appreciate that we're doing serious scholarship here and that this is the show that you have to lend to."

THOMAS: He liked that, I would imagine.

SCHIMMEL: He did. He did. He understood that that was putting, in some ways, the history before the immediate gratification. And, in that respect, once we said, "The book has to be

comprehensive and complete" ... First of all, it opened up everything that we needed to find out. We weren't just looking to see that which we could beg, steal and borrow type thing, but we were going to -- so the information became much more available. And his willingness to even help with some loans was, like, okay one good turn returns....

THOMAS: That's when you knew he was on board.

SCHIMMEL: Yes. "MOCA's making a really serious book," and, clearly, David was very engaged with it. It's funny. I think he realized how much it was needed when we sat down with the checklist and pictures -- not the check list for the exhibition but the checklist for the catalogue itself -- there were so many works, including works in MOCA's own collection, which were mis-titled.

THOMAS: Really.

SCHIMMEL: Lots of them. If you look carefully at the catalogue, you'll see what we did. We put the title as he understood them to be - and I think he was right - as the first title.

THOMAS: "He" David or "he" Bob.

SCHIMMEL: "He" Bob. We went through every single title with Bob. David needed the information, too. He wanted the information. We put the lender's title, or the title as the work became commonly known and there are examples of it in parenthesis. I told all the lenders, "I'm not taking any of your favorite titles away but the reality is..." -- and Bob laughed so hard when I said this -- "you know, 'Untitled' is good when a work is cheap. But when it starts becoming really expensive, titles somehow gravitate toward money."

THOMAS: That's very funny.

SCHIMMEL: It's strange. It was really hard, for example -- MOCA's work is known as *Man With the White Shoes*. It's a description. It's actually *Untitled*. And the amazing thing about Bob -- and I remember he said this to me, actually, at that funny meeting where he didn't agree with my recommendation that we stabilize the sheer but instead go with this more conservation-heavy approach. At the same time I asked him a few questions. What was this? Was this really a Twombly drawing over here? "No, that's a Jack Tworkov." I went, "Oh. That's interesting." And I'd go, "Is that your mom?" And he goes, "Yeah," and he started saying, "This is this, this is this --" and I said to him, "Bob, how do you remember these things?" He'd just had lunch with Sid [Felsen], and he was already two-sails to the wind, kind of thing. But it was "good health." This was the early '90s, and he was --

THOMAS: Right. It doesn't seem to make a difference, the alcohol.

SCHIMMEL: No, no. Well, short-term it may screw everything up, but long-term, no difference.

He looked at it in a way with just such sweet, sad eyes. He goes, "I remember these pieces as if I'd made them yesterday, and I don't remember what I did yesterday." I think that is absolutely the case, that he had an outstanding memory for these things.

We went through every single work to try to correct. We did correct -- I don't know -- I think thirty-plus works were corrected, in terms of the title.

THOMAS: And were you able to go through each *Combine* with Bob, and say, "Now is this a Tworkov or is this a Twombly? Or is this your mother?"

SCHIMMEL: Only our own. Because I did interview him extensively, and I used -- you can see it in my essay -- I used some quotes -- when I read the raw transcript of this interview, it's pretty abominable. It's like bits and fragments of information. It wasn't like -- when he was on a stage, he would pull it all together. You hear Thomas, and you hear David, and you hear Bob, and he's trying to get these things out. I realized that, at a certain point, you put him in front of an object, that thing that he made and it absolutely comes to life for him. It just lights up, the way his work does, and he can see it. If you show him a picture, even a fairly good picture, it was literally like pulling teeth to get him to talk -- somehow it just didn't have the presence --

THOMAS: It doesn't have that, in his mind, tactile moment when he chose that image, and --

SCHIMMEL: He couldn't feel it. For some reason, it wouldn't spark his memory. He could deal with the title of it. He had a tendency to, if you read the literature, to retell the same story -- he had a little story about this piece, and that's the story, and that's what exists. If you'd get him in front of the piece itself, it would have a way of really reconnecting, I think -- the object itself would really spark his memory in a way that was more complete.

THOMAS: Did you have an opportunity, or would you have felt comfortable saying to him, "Okay, of all of these images, did you put the photograph of Sue Weil down first? Where did you start?"

SCHIMMEL: Yes. I did in some cases sort of start with -- like I remember there was one time it came up -- you know, he used the image of the Statue of Liberty quite often. It comes up in several pieces. He said it meant a lot to him, because it was the first thing he saw in New York. There was this slightly confused story about having gotten off the train in New Jersey, and thought he was in New York. So he was looking at the Statue of Liberty, but it was from the wrong side of the river. I don't know if this is true, or just funny fiction.

So it would start that way. But I did not get that feeling. And as a matter of fact, I know, for example, especially with *Man With the White Shoes*, which is the thing I've interviewed him most extensively about -- it's probably the thing I'm most clear about, in terms of what I wrote. I don't even have a really clear idea from him [of] the process, not just one piece on a paper, but the elements -- if you really look at it, there's a black painting, there's a white painting, there's an early one of those pink collage works. I said, "Well, you must have re-purposed this, and re-purposed that, and borrowed this from here."

No. I could get him to talk about a specific image. It was really hard, even with something where there was documentation, for example -- this was very important, both to me and to David, for obvious reasons -- was the chronology of Moderna's [Museet] piece, which -- the angora goat was on the wall. [Monogram] It was standing in front of it. There were pictures. When you started saying, "How did this come to here?" it was just like, "Well, yeah, but there were so many years in between --." You could get more information about what was laid down on the flatbed, like this got put next to this. "This is my feet, this is a tightrope," than him being able to correlate the chronology of its making.

THOMAS: This iteration was on the wall; this one Jasper said, "Hmnm. It really doesn't belong on the wall."

SCHIMMEL: [Laughs] Exactly. Then when you start bringing that sort of stuff up, he goes kind of nuts. And David would be very, very careful about it, but it was like, "Why did you take it off the wall?" It was something -- and you could see [Laughs], "No, no, no, that was not --"

You know -- I'm sure I'm like every one -- sometimes you hear things. Sometimes you think you've heard them, and sometimes you just make them up yourself, because they sound so damned good. But I think it was really, in some ways, very hard for him to talk about this period, and it had a lot to do with it being a period of enormous joy for him, followed by enormous heartbreak. I think, for him, the relationship with Jasper was unparalleled; probably vice versa, too, but, certainly, I think -- I remember him saying something like [it was] such an intense, such a powerful, such a rewarding time in his life, that when it ended, it was hard for him to even stay in New York -- or something to that effect. I remember him sort of saying that. He had to almost rid himself of Jasper, literally -- get rid of the pieces. It's fascinating that --

THOMAS: It sounds like he gave a lot of them to Jasper.

SCHIMMEL: Well, that's it. No, no I think what happened is -- Jasper, you know, is a little cooler cucumber. Jasper's cool, and Bob is bubbly, teary-eyed hot, in that respect. Jasper kept all the Rauschenbergs, and Bob got rid of all the Johnses. Stupid! I guess he realized that.

THOMAS: Well, that was for ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange].

SCHIMMEL: Yes, it was. And it was, in a way, I think really hard for him to talk about these.

That said, he was incredibly generous, and he would talk about, "This piece was made on Staten Island." He and Jasper had gone out and camped out on the beach on Staten Island. They'd picked up all these -- for a piece called *Talisman* -- funny little objects. So he was very, very generous, but the pieces themselves -- I think he could deal with the photographs -- This gets back to what I was saying earlier. -- A title would remind him of certain stories. The pieces themselves seemed to be harder for him, as objects, to deal with.

This I am certain about -- and this is maybe the most interesting thing I'll have to say, in terms of just *seeing* something -- Bob -- his first encounter with the exhibition was not my installation, it was over at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], and the Met is pretty persnickety about they

want to do it their way; they're going to do it. Even as the curator of the show, I didn't feel like I had quite as much to say about the installation as *I* would have liked. I was more religiously conscious of the years in which things were made, and I felt that the story would tell itself if you really just followed the chronology, not front-load the show, or anything like that.

THOMAS: Sure.

SCHIMMEL: So the first he got to see of the exhibition was on the day before the press preview at the Met. He had arranged for he, and Ileana, and Merce -- all three of them were in their wheelchairs. Ileana just immediately says, "I want to see my bird." This is how she referred to it. She bee-lined straight for *Canyon*. Merce, who was the oldest of them, but somehow was kind of in the best shape. Bob went through that exhibition like a bat out of hell. I had never seen an artist go through their own show more quickly than Bob. Now look -- Bob is not known for his -- he's kind of ADD, or at least he doesn't have one of the great attention spans of all time, and he likes all that stuff bombarding him -- but he seemed unusually in a hurry.

I didn't think that much of it but it was a little odd. He was at the end of the show. They were still in the first third of it. When the show was here -- and I really worked -- I just think the installation came out magnificently. We put our *Man With the White Shoes*, together with the *Odalisque* from Ludwig, and the male and the female. The first gallery was all pink in doorways and architecture --

THOMAS: Gorgeous.

SCHIMMEL: It just laid out, I thought, so beautifully.

We had a big fundraiser, and the lady who was in charge of the fundraiser didn't want anyone to see the show until after the dinner -- which infuriated me to no end.

THOMAS: That's silly.

SCHIMMEL: Yes. She said, "Well, you know, the dinner will lead up --" I said, "Everyone's going to be tired. They're here to see the show. It's normal." "Oh, no, no, no. We're going to have the dinner. Then the *reveal* will be --" She loves to do these party, and that was the word -- "the *reveal*" -- will be afterwards.

Well, I was really upset about it, and I was kind of embarrassed by the whole thing. But I had to figure out -- she was doing the party, and she'd given us a quarter-million dollars for the show and whatever. But I didn't want to tell Bob, so I said, "Bob, you know, [Laughs] we're doing this wonderful big party --." He loved the party, and there were Hollywood people there, and that was great. There were lots of little speeches. But I said, you know -- he was only going to come in that day, and spend overnight.

THOMAS: Wow.

SCHIMMEL: It was a quick trip.

THOMAS: Wow.

SCHIMMEL: Yes. Very quick. And it was a whole thing, getting him from Florida, in a wheelchair. I go, "Bob, we've decided -- I'd like for you to have some time with the show alone. So why don't you come down before the dinner. We're not going to let anyone see the exhibition until after dinner, so you can have a chance to see it, on your own." Which was, I thought, a brilliant move on my part, and one you'd know Bob would certainly embrace, because he was so egomaniacal that the idea that nobody can see the show until after -- I said "You've got forty-five minutes alone with the exhibition."

Well, he went right through the damned exhibition [Laughs], again, kind of like a bat -- he said, "Yeah, okay, okay. Okay." And he looked so weary afterwards. I said, "Bob, what are you thinking?" And he said something to the effect -- he says "You know, it's one thing to see pictures of it. But when I see them all together, it's so hard for me." He says "It brings back all the joys of that moment, but all the sadness and what happened afterwards." And I realized, in a funny way, that only somebody who really makes things - loves to work with his hands -- it was that, in fact, like a religious object, a reliquary object -- these things, these objects had a meaning that he can only -- it's the only thing on earth that makes him somehow connect when he was twenty-seven years old --

THOMAS: Yes, exactly.

SCHIMMEL: -- and living the life of a young -- I mean -- that all time disappears. And I think, besides in some ways being jealous of how famous these pieces became, I think it was actually physically hard for him to be in the room with so much of this life force of his personality, from this point when he was -- and I even remember he was saying -- "I don't know how I did that." He said that about other things, but he just kind of went, "Yeah, I ... ." It was kind of heartbreaking to see how really, genuinely difficult it was for him to be with these things. I realized, "Yes. I now can maybe understand why you didn't want to do these *Combine* shows, and why --." It came as a huge surprise to him, a really big surprise, that the reviews -- which were, for the Met, terrific -- and how there was a genuine outpouring of enthusiasm. There was a sense that these things were vital, and meaningful, and, I think for Bob -- I remember saying, "You know, there are a lot of young artists who are seeing this," and that meant so much to him.

He said, "I just didn't know that people really needed to see these again." He said "I didn't understand that." He said, "I thought everyone had seen them enough." I think he was genuinely surprised, in a very positive way --

THOMAS: Sure.

SCHIMMEL: -- that they had a *freshness* for a whole generation of viewers, and I think artists, especially, that, in some ways, they didn't have for him anymore. It was hard, in some respects to... -- I like to do shows not just with artists but, in some ways, *for* artists. To me, if I can get this right -- and it's sort of what you're doing -- saying right now. It's like if you can't get this information during the artist's lifetime, 200 years from now, it's all speculation. If we have one thing we can do, when we work with artists during their lifetime, it's to make as much of that

material available so it can be used and reinterpreted for the future. I felt like Bob is my number-one client, and it was hard to have him not kind of take the pleasure that you would want somebody to have, in seeing this extraordinary body of work.

But I don't think it was a pleasure. I think it was hard.

THOMAS: Because it was really a walk down memory lane for him.

SCHIMMEL: Yes.

THOMAS: It's a very interesting autobiographical moment that you're describing about reflecting on that time. I have spent some time with a woman called Hermine Ford. Do you know Hermine?

SCHIMMEL: Yes.

THOMAS: She was telling me that when they were growing up, her parents -- she said, "My parents were ecumenical Jews, and we celebrated every holiday. We celebrated Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter -- everything -- and my parents would give dinner parties all the time. They would always say to us, 'Okay. We've got room for twelve people at the dinner table. Who do you want?'" And she said, "And we would always say, 'Bob and Jasper, because they're so much fun.'"

SCHIMMEL: Yes. Yes. You know, part of the difficulty, also -- everyone in the room, when we were doing the interviews about the works themselves, for the publication - and I've done this with other artists - , I said, "Whatever we say here, I'm just going to use quotes. You're going to have a chance to read my essay. You are in a truly privileged position. You don't like something? It's gone. You don't think it's said right? You tell me. My access to you is more important than my kind of truth to my own ... " And, of course, Bob was fantastic. He never wanted to change anything, and he could not have been more generous. And most artists really are that way. They'll get upset about two sentences out of it.

It was difficult. I didn't get as much as I had hoped. Again, I think it was because we were looking at photographs, not objects. But Darryl is there, David is there, Thomas is there. They all have enormous knowledge.

THOMAS: Yes.

SCHIMMEL: And [yet] none of them were there at the time these pieces were made. So it's difficult. David was especially helpful, because he would say, "Well, do you remember this?" Or, "Remind you of that," or stuff like that. But it was a challenge, because you could also see the difficulties of talking about this period in the kind of intimacy of the autobiographical content of the work itself. And that's the essay I wrote. It was among the most, if not the most, auto... -- all of his work is very autobiographical, but this period of '54-'55-'56-'57, the first real phase -- the *Combines* -- is heartbreakingly autobiographical. He's like wearing his family history, his

love life -- between Twombly, and Jasper, and his sister, and his mother, and his father, and Christopher [Rauschenberg], and Susan [Weil] -- it's really kind of complicated and fascinating.

THOMAS: From looking at the *Combines* what sense did you get of Bob's family? I ask because one of the things that I understand is that when Bob started doing printmaking at Tatyana's [Grosman], but also when he was with the Judson Group -- with all those dancers, whom he loved so much, and just hanging out -- it was a real family for him, and that he has, since the 1960s, say -- some of the members of the family have changed, but he does seem to have this body of people [around him] about whom he deeply cares. I was just wondering if that was what his life was like growing up, also. Do you have any sense of that?

SCHIMMEL: We did talk -- especially because of the amount of time I've spent looking at every single bit and fragment of the *Untitled (Man With the White Shoes)*, and it is so deeply autobiographical -- one side of it is the relatively short history of a fabulously talented young man and his own history as an artist and it's fascinating to see Bob's only been an artist for five years, and he's already doing his own little retrospective in a box. I said, "Well, that is a black painting," -- and he said well... , -- and the shoes are like the white paintings, as was said before. That was kind of clear. That's one side. That's his history between 1950 and 1955. But the other side is just unbelievable, and it's just filled with memorabilia, and life, and pictures of his mom, and his dad, and it's their twenty-fifth anniversary. His wife. And there's Twombly, there's Tworkov, there's his sister. I mean, it's so frigging perfect it's unbelievable. Here, this stand-in for himself, the man with the white shoes -- Narcissus -- looking down into the mirror, and when he looks down into the mirror, what does he see? He sees his sister, the winner of the Miss Louisiana Yam Festival. Clearly.

When you start reading the correspondence, and the letters, and especially some of the things -- and the letters, he would actually re-use them. They'd be in a collection, or they'd be in other pieces -- I get the sense that his sister was the privileged child, the chosen one. There's a letter from his mom sort of saying something to the effect of, "Oh, well, she just won the Miss Louisiana Yam Festival, and she's doing so well." And you know how parents can be very, kind of -- instigate of a certain kind of competition between siblings. And she's home, and he's off in art school, and he's kind of broke. "What are you doing up there? It doesn't make any sense."

I think he made his own family as an adult. I think what he's doing and this is really purely speculative in a piece like *Untitled (Man With the White Shoes)*, is, in a sense, constructing a history of his own early childhood -- autobiographical -- that in some ways is unresolved and unfulfilled. I know he would say funny things like the early white paintings were used by his mom in preparation for a hurricane. I think it's probably true -- that she put them in the windows to seal things up. You can say that's very practical. It's sort of a Texas story. But it's also an indication of their lack of appreciation, in the most basic sense, of who this young man was to become, and the importance of these things that he makes.

And it was interesting -- and I'm sure you saw him together with his sister, who's a pretty terrific, dynamic individual -- and they were still, at the very end, kind of going at it. I can't remember exactly, but Bob, I think, was quite convinced that he was not the most-loved child. All children feel their sense in the pecking order of the household.

THOMAS: And to be dyslexic, and not have anybody know that as a problem --

SCHIMMEL: I was dyslexic in the '50s, and I think it's a miracle that my mom figured it out and actually trained me. And he's growing up in Texas, at a time when who the hell even knew what dyslexia was?

THOMAS: Did you all talk about that?

SCHIMMEL: Yes.

THOMAS: Both being dyslexic?

SCHIMMEL: Yes. Yes. And I also said that my oldest is ADD -- which nobody ever knew what ADD was, until it was quote "invented" fifteen years ago. It's a hereditary thing, and it made me sort of think about myself.

Yes. We talked about it in terms of his own -- I said, "You know, my son -- " and I've heard this about a lot of kids who are ADD, which is obviously different than dyslexia, but they do overlap. It seems counter-intuitive but Ritalin is like speed, and you'd think if somebody's hyperactive, why would you give them a drug that makes them more hyperactive? But it has the reverse effect. Interesting. And that people, kids who have ADD, and adults, do better when there are a number of things quote "that would normally be distractions" -- music, TV, activity going on -- and that activity actually helps you to focus. I'm not making this up. This is well-known for ADD folks; that the ability to focus is actually enhanced by tuning out what would normally be distractions.

THOMAS: Ergo the TV set.

SCHIMMEL: And the radio, and music, and things like broadcast. He always had the radio on, and the TV on, and he said something [like], "Yeah! Works for me!" He remembered this well enough and this is the amazing thing about Bob, also a funny thing -- we had the big fancy opening the first night. He decided not to go back to Florida. He had had a good time, and he was going to spend another day. He decided to go to the regular members' opening. Many artists don't go to the members' opening, but some do. And people do enjoy it. Artists do enjoy it, because it's not the mucky-mucks. There are young people and artists.

He sat out there in his wheelchair, right there on the plaza -- not in the gallery, which, as I said, he spent no time in. He would meet people. If they had a catalogue he would sign it. He would say hello. My oldest son -- the one who's dyslexic, he's ADD -- he was in line, and so when he got up there I stood up and said, "Bob, I want to introduce you to my son." He was so sweet, in a way that I think a father could understand. He said something so kind about me to my son. He whispered it in his ear.

THOMAS: Sweet.

SCHIMMEL: Very sweet. Then he said "You know" – and he turns to Max, he goes, "You and I have something in common. We're similar." Max goes, "How is that?" It was a wonderful kind of connection with a young -- he goes, "Well, I know from talking to your dad that you have ADD". And he goes, "I think I had it, too, and it's probably been a good part of who I am." Then he said something like, "I hope you can do as much with who you are as I --," really sweet, really paternalistic, so generous. And the fact that he had remembered this conversation -- this is obviously sort of late in his life, from a year and a half earlier, was amazing. He really was very special.

I think he absolutely had this quote "disorder" --

THOMAS: Whatever one calls it.

SCHIMMEL: That's what they call it these days. It's a combination of things. And I think it is reflected in his work in so many ways. I am absolutely convinced. I'm not one who believes quote in the quote "therapy" of work. I don't think it's like you sit down, in a medical way, and you try to heal yourself. I just think he found an equilibrium with all this activity going on around him. And I think his truly generous desire both to share and to collaborate, and really collaborate, also came, I think, from a kind of need to have those kinds of quote [/unquote] "distractions," which then provide him with a real sense of clarity and focus. I think that's something he intuitively -- and is there anyone more intuitive than Bob Rauschenberg? -- understood.

THOMAS: That intuition -- I watched him a couple times in the studio, working, and it was so interesting to me, that focus. I don't know what series he was working on at the time, but he was doing his big transfers. He took an image, and he knew exactly where it would go on the paper. There was no "let's move it an inch here," or "move it an inch there." No ambivalence. That's what he wanted.

SCHIMMEL: And it's the same way when he would talk about something. He knew exactly what it was, he knew where it was, he knew where it came from. I don't know. It seemed as quote "chaotic" as everyone imagined him to be. I think he was always striving, in a very dedicated way, to order things in his own way. But there was no desire to leave the heap as a heap -- not like a Diderot, where you just kind of get lost in these waves of information. For him, I think the ordering, the structuring, the building of a kind of architecture for the ephemeral was something that was really important. And I do think that is what he was doing vis-à-vis his autobiography in these early *Combines*; that he was providing architecture. There *are* references, obviously, to architecture -- architecture, structure and ordering -- for his own history.

THOMAS: Your reading of those works -- you layer other kinds of meaning into those works -- sexual meaning, whatever. Do you have a sense that Bob -- that that was an intuitive presentation, if that's the right word; or, that that's just part of the takeaway that one *might* have.

Jim Rosenquist writes in his autobiography that everything represents something, and he knows exactly what it represents when he puts it in a piece. Did you talk with Bob about whether or not when he put something in a piece, what it represented?

SCHIMMEL: I did, specifically, when we talked about ... Leo Steinberg -- a brilliant man --

THOMAS: I'm so disappointed I didn't get to spend time with him.

SCHIMMEL: -- a brilliant man. I tried to get him to write about -- I did a show of de Kooning's women, works on paper, and I was trying to get him, near the end of his life, to write about it. He said he was too busy, he was dealing with early Renaissance art -- which I can understand. [Laughs] You've got so many years -- you might as well do the things you really want to do!

THOMAS: I know.

SCHIMMEL: You know, his whole take -- and it stuck for many, many years. It really wasn't until Charlie [Charles] Stuckey, who's a brilliant art historian, started trying to unravel *Rebus*, which is a little bit difficult to do. It's a very enigmatic piece, and in some ways it's the most "Johnsian" -- sort of a riddle wrapped in -- but I asked him about the take on, specifically, the Stockholm piece [*Monogram*] that he described at that time, how these bits and fragments of information just rained down and landed haphazardly, like a flatbed, onto the surface, and there was no rhyme or reason.

I could not disagree with him more. I think he was completely wrong in his take. I think that's what he wanted it to be -- this kind of automatic, almost Dada, no rhyme, no reason -- and the more you talked to Bob -- and you could say, "Well, here's his wife, here; his son, here; his lover, here; his sister, here; himself, here." And yes, again, *Untitled (Man With the White Shoes)* is almost -- it's not unique. There are qualities of that in many of the works, but it's something where he goes about it in a very deliberative way. And I said, "You knew what you were doing here." He said, "Oh, no. It was just stuff I had." I go, "Come on, Bob. You can't have this, and this, and this, and this, and this."

If you asked him to connect the dots, he would resist. He really would. If you asked him, "What is *that*? What is *that*? What is that? What is that?", he'll tell you exactly what it is. If you want him to say, "Oh, you want a nice little catch phrase? This is the most autobiographical work. This is the work where I dealt with my family, and all the unresolved issues having to do both with my upbringing -- my parents being second-fiddle to them, my breakup with Cy, and going to Jasper." And Jasper is so beautiful in this work, you know. He's got the photograph of his face, all right up, mashed against it -- He never would say that. But, unlike somebody like Jasper, where it would be so deeply encoded that it would be really impossible to unravel -- the iconography is so obtuse, or from specific, autobiographical content -- there's no way you can really look there and say, "Oh, well, this is a gay man, and we interpret two balls."

THOMAS: Right.

SCHIMMEL: There are lots of gay readings on it.

THOMAS: Yes. I'm from Washington. I saw that show. ["Hide and Seek"]

SCHIMMEL: Right -- and it makes everybody crazy.

Bob, while he would not connect the dots together, he could not be more generous in laying out the road map. All the directions are there -- every little stop on the trip is there. There's nothing hidden, there's nothing really encoded. And the notion --- and this was clear -- I said, "Well, okay. But your feet --" "Yes, yes. That's my feet on the ground, on the flatbed. There's a man walking the tight...--" It's very of literal. The choices are absolutely clear. When you look at a piece like *Canyon*, and you see the relationship of the photograph of his son to the original myth -- he knew the myth [Ganymede]; he understood what it meant; he put his child in a very specific way. He's not going to sit there and say, "I agree," but there's nothing unequivocal about it. It's absolutely clear.

I just recently wrote a piece about *Tower* --

THOMAS: The Paul Taylor piece.

SCHIMMEL: The Paul Taylor piece. It's a complicated piece, because it's a piece that begins with a very specific *a priori* -- this performance was dealing specifically with this Roman/Greek myth. Well, you start reading -- as I did -- what's the myth based on, and you start looking at the image, and then you see what the original libretto for this -- then you gotta go, "Oh. It couldn't be more literal." Yes. There's the male; there's the female; there's them looking at themselves; [there's] the harvest of the wheat." It's like boom, boom, boom. There are no ifs, ands, or buts.

THOMAS: I want to look at the Dante drawings like that, too. I've looked at one drawing, and read one canto --

SCHIMMEL: -- and it's literal. You couldn't believe how --

THOMAS: I couldn't believe it.

SCHIMMEL: -- almost to the point where you go, "Oh. This is illustrational," in the best sense.

THOMAS: Yes. It was so beautiful.

SCHIMMEL: In the best sense.

THOMAS: It was so beautiful, and I thought, "I want to find a complete set of the cantos," -- and I'm like Bob, in this regard-- "and I don't want to see them in a book. I want to see the best possible images, so I can read along with it. Because I was dumbstruck by the connection. One of my takeaways from your essay was the intellectual capacity of Bob Rauschenberg that seems to be a little bit -- I don't want to say "unnoticed," or "dismissed," or --

SCHIMMEL: Dismissed. I think you're right. Bob is the purely intuitive one, and Jasper is the cerebral guy. His [Bob's] ability to read something -- he wasn't much of a reader, but maybe he

read the way James Joyce wrote, in wonderful, sort of visual language. I think he was not uncomfortable with the idea that he would, quote, be "quite literal and illustrative" for Dante. Well, you know, the complete set of the drawings is at MoMA, but he did an offset of the complete set, which we have here at MOCA.

THOMAS: Which you have here. I think they have it at the National Gallery, too. Well, I don't know.

SCHIMMEL: It's so funny. It was an offset edition. There were more than a hundred of them or so, and they're relatively -- relative to the drawings -- inexpensive. You should be able to sit down with gloves and flip through them, and read through it, and be able to do that. If it's something you have a real issue, finding someplace closer to home, and you do need to sit there and do it someday here at MOCA, or for a week, you want to set up in the library with the book and the offset, you could certainly do that.

THOMAS: I'd love to do that.

SCHIMMEL: But I think you'll find an easier place to do it.

THOMAS: Sure.

SCHIMMEL: So I asked him about the Leo Steinberg, because it's such a specific read, and he said, "Oh, I don't even know what Leo had to say." Again, it would be nice to find out, "What did you think about it? Is that wrong?" No answer, really, whatsoever. It was not like he was going to criticize it, it was that he wasn't even, quote, "familiar" with it.

That said, I know that when I talked about his work -- and even some of the very personal autobiographical part in that public interview that we did -- he didn't clam up and run away.

THOMAS: Bite your head off? No.

SCHIMMEL: No. He was comfortable with it. And he had every opportunity, with my essay, to say, "Take that out. And strike that." Nothing. He made no note. So I don't think he was in the least bit uncomfortable with a very specific and iconographically driven -- I think he was, in these *Combines* painting a portrait of himself, and maybe trying to make that whole family together, in a way that it didn't actually ever really function in his own childhood. There's one thing for sure. I remember talking about it. He never achieved, in his father's lifetime, the recognition that he had hoped from his father -- his father being kind of like, "Why would you do this? What does this mean?" And that's not true, I think, ultimately, in both his mother and his sister; that was very important.

THOMAS: That's hurtful. (SCHIMMEL: Yes.) That's hurtful.

Well, thank you so much. I could talk all afternoon, but I think you probably have other things to do.

SCHIMMEL: Yes. They have me working on a model at two o'clock.

THOMAS: Let me turn you off, here. Thank you.

[End of Interview]