

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Unidentified / Interview with Robert Rauschenberg / Van Gogh Television, 1983

Tape #6
Van Gogh - Television

M = Male interviewer
F = female interviewer

Side A

- RR: (lots of music, etc. in background, hard to hear conversation)
... and they were such honery characters too, you know, not only do they want to bore you to death, they were unpleasant about it. Like the conceptualist, and the minimalist and all those things, I'm saying this to you so ... Yeah, I wanted to do Cecille B. de Mills columns in the next gallery over. I have my paints here. It wasn't as though I didn't have my paints here. (laugh) Couple more years I probably won't be able to shimmy up there, but you know, as long as I paint as I go.
- M: Make a bosun's chair ... Terry knows how to sail, we'll put up a rig for you.
- RR: He's watching the people watching the tv, because he made it.
- M: They'll be here watching all day.
- RR: Yeah, it's better, isn't it? I mean, you're only half as bored. Do you want your picture taken next to that one and sent to Nanny? (laugh)
(lots of really loud singing, etc. now)
I've been working with the pieces - hang them up on the other wall, usually it's
7 assistants, sometimes as many as 30. I didn't know what I was going to do. ... One piece ... (can't hear) so they decided that they'd have a business meeting with the other people, and so all of a sudden I was left alone in a, I guess, a quarter of a mile by an eighth of a mile factory, that's just one building, and hadn't had a chance to just look through it, and I ran across all these masterpieces.

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M: Those were the plates?

RR: Those were the D cellis, the , the Rafaels, the Divenci's, and I didn't touch the Renoirs. I wouldn't touch a Renoir and so they came back. I said, I think I've got a really lousy idea, you know. And because I actually hadn't had enough time to do what I - it was like every day I went to work. I was there for like two months and one month off, but at the same time the one month off I was also working on the project, and that's a long time to know what you're doing, because I'm used to going to work every day not knowing what I'm doing, and so I had to know what I'm doing while I'm doing it, to sustain some kind of awareness that, I mean, I've always hated that, that art's a problem. So I mean you know like you have a first hand problem, and everything gets to be the solution. Too simplistic.

M: When you have art assistants, it's not quite so easy.

RR: They don't speak the same language, they don't have the same ideas. I tried to develop a face that looked as though like I know exactly where I'm going. That's exactly what I'm doing. You know, but every now and then I would crack up and think What the hell am I doing here? And then somebody would like, 30 people would run in with something or another, and to try to get them to stop trying to help me was a lot more difficult. But anyway, so with these, and said, I just had fun - it was like my vacation.

M: The most delightful image is here, to my taste

and so obviously so very free and accessible. Some of the other work really makes you take a deep breath ...

RR: It reminds you that you should beat the artist up first, right?
Become pregnant and barefoot.

M: How do you, these are but they're not paints on ceramic.

RR: It's clay glazes, and come separated, and it's not necessarily a fact you know that ^{the} color will cook in the way that you thought it would. It's a very even cumbersome.

M: Let's take a look at the other pieces which were your main purpose...

RR: So when does fairness have anything to do with it?

M: I want to get into it, but I've got to change my clothes. You have me at a disadvantage, I feel very ...

RR: You've got the beret!

M: I'll trade you the beret for the shirt.

RR: It's his show right? I don't know. I think I'm being too silly.

F: ... reality, unless we give ourselves our full reality. We can hardly be disposed to feel a thing is related to many other things in all kinds of ways, unless we are happy in our being related to many other things.

RR: I don't think we can afford the time to wait to be happy. So my works are simply invitations to this point of view.

F: Well, it's an invitation I accept.

M: Do you think that you are trying to put opposites together in your work?

RR: I don't believe in that simple kind of, my involvement is close to that because it's based on differences, and the avoidance of a single point of view, but I don't believe in opposites. That's too easy. In either-ors. I mean black and whites and things. I

believe "and".

F: Yes, which is the of opposites. Like the fact that an individual is his relations.

RR: But I don't like the idea that because this is something, then it negates something else. I mean, all of our differences exist simultaneously, and feed off of each other. That's their nourishment. One of the first important lessons I ever learned in art was that I couldn't understand when I was at the art student's great masters, you know, and everybody was drawing lines all through all kinds of artworks, reproductions of artworks, and I tried it, and I draw a line anywhere and it would pass through several meridians that were climax points, you know, and I just, so I figured out that the thing that all great artworks had in common is their differences, not their similarities. I went back to the U , and so if you start looking for the differences instead of the similarities, you know, well then the whole world opens up for you. I went back to(Ufitsi) maybe 25 years and saw paintings that were masterpieces for me then, and they were still masterpieces, but this time I noticed that they were all, the thing that made them great was their eccentricity, because it was all about the church, it all was in a certain Renaissance format and style, but you know the fact that some of the angels were wearing scotch plaid, you know, and things.

F: I didn't notice that.

RR: Well, if you just look at it that way, look at the differences, and you'll see that nearly nothing is the same.

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- F: There's a ^{question} from Eli Segul's 15 questions about beauty. Is beauty the making out of opposites? about seeing this in difference, which I'd like to read to you, see what your impressions are. He asks this, Does every work of art show the kinship to be shown in objects and all reality, and at the same time the subtle and tremendous differences~~x~~, the drama of otherness that one can find among the things of the world. For example, ...
- RR: It's the difference is the birth of the object which means that you are a unique person. If you can recognize that. Now you can't have a ^{of} school/people who recognize the same difference in art.
- F: Well, like in these works over here, the 7 characters, were they all done with that fine paper? You veil the collage and the veiling of those disparate things joins them and makes them akin. That gives them a sameness which brings out the sense of how different, how disparate, they are.
- RR: I had paintings earlier that I did with the, like a lot of my work has been in, almost clinically, related to exactly what you're talking about. Like I did the all-white paintings because I wanted to see how much you could cut out of a traditional sense, academic sense, that would make, and still have something to look at, to respond to, and okay, it wasn't there enough, because I overlooked the fact that things had to have a particular size, didn't occur to me, but that once it's all white, and no image, and no artistry in the brushstrokes - I even had other people

paint them, you know, so they couldn't possibly be conceived of as any facility that was like in my hand. I got great people to paint them though. Pontus Hulton did them, Cy Tromley did them, a couple of other very well-known artists, you know, and nobody knows who.

F: Were they all different?

RR: Of course they were all different, but I didn't want one of the differences to be that anybody could accuse me of having talent. And then I did another series that relates to what you're talking about.

F: It's not me, it's Eli Segul.

RR: Well, you or Eli Segul, either one.

: We're studying what Mr. Segul ... it's important.

RR: Right, but he's not here, is he, so I'm talking to you.

I did a piece that was designed to stop people from saying, It couldn't be any other way. And I knew that it could be any other way, you know, and still be interesting. So I took the same materials and laid them out four times, and used them differently in each one, and I thought, I mean I didn't want to make a career out of this, so like if you could do it four or five times, it must imply that you could do it 150 or 1000 times, and all of those pieces were different, and each one was, you know, fine.

: With the same materials.

RR: Yeah, exactly the same materials, not basically, but exactly the same.

F: Did you get an emotion looking at the four pieces and seeing how,

even though they were completely the same, as far as you could make it, they were different?

RR: I exaggerated the possibilities within the limitation of the materials. The other one I did was like factum 1 and 2, where I went from canvas to canvas copying myself back and forth.

F: Well, the starting place here was question #2 from this broadside published by the Terrain Gallery, and in this question where Mr. Segul talks about sameness and difference, he's talking about a oneness of opposites. This is the basis I'm using in a class I'm giving on Saturday, and I want to make sure ...

RR: Well, just change it for me, I don't believe in opposites. I don't think it's that simple. Differences, yes, extreme differences, but not opposites.

M: Would you like to learn more about what the Segul theory of opposites ?

RR: I think I'm doing fine, thank you. (laugh)

F: Well, one of the good things that I've read about you is that you a lot.

RR: Yeah, I like to discover more than learn. Learn implies that there's a fact.

F: Hmmm, you don't think there is such a thing?

RR: You'd have to stop everything if there was a fact. That's a denial of life, and its motion, which is the only thing that keeps it from being dead.

F: But do you think a thing needs both its isness and its changeness, its freedom and its stability?

RR: It will be as it's changing.

F: Right, but is it as it's changing?

RR: Sure

F: And the thing that I'm asking about myself, whether this is true, whether everything that exists, this is what I've been studying, everything that exists is all the time, and that means you as you hold your glass, at rest and in motion, free and orderly.

RR: I'm not this ice that's melting, my arm's getting tired, I'm probably more nervous about this - everything is changing.

F: So as you see it, the stability aspect is an illusion?

RR: I'll go a little further than that, that the stability aspect is a lie. Did I disqualify myself? (ha ha)

F: No, you have a basic disagreement with what I think, but

RR: Well, that's all right, isn't it? I mean, we both have just proved our point.

: Could I steal you - ok, we're set up for ...

F: Thank you very much.

RR: ? Mine's for just further examination, and just want to broaden the scope of what you're talking about, so that there are shades in there, shades of sameness that don't get ignored, and if you do

F: Well, Mr. Segul said in this essay is Art is reality and in its beauty the make one of opposites, made me love your work more, and your work made me love that more. And I hope that you will find out more what Mr. Segul has said about all this, because I think Eli Segul's the greatest critic the world has had.

RR: I can tell!

: Well, come to the class Saturday morning, it would be good for your life, and good for art.

RR: It would be better for my life if I'm in my car heading south for the sunshine.

TVB: Hi, I'm Terry van B , Bob's assistant, who are you all?

F: My name is Carrie Wilson, I'm co-director of the Terrain Gallery, and the basis of the Terrain Gallery is Eli Segul's theory of opposites. In 1955 Eli Segul said that all beauty is a making one of opposites, and the broadside that I read from when I was talking to Mr. Rauschenberg is called Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites? And this is our basis in selecting work, and has been since 1955 when we first opened. And I think these questions are a true description of why Robert Rauschenberg's work matters. And even though he doesn't think so, I think he is trying to show the oneness of opposites in reality. As Mr. Segul says, the kinship to be found in all objects, in all realities, and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness one can find among the things of this world. I think any panel you look at here shows it, and I think his work is very important because he shows that the stuff of reality that we take for granted has the absolute within it.

TVB: Why don't you send us a copy of that statement there? It's sort of interesting.

: This Saturday, Miss Wilson and Miss R who is another student of aesthetic realism, will be giving a class on ...

TVB: We won't be here - going back to do some more work. Make some more art.

: Well, I think what they have to say about his art would be very important to the understanding of his work.

F: I'll send you a partial transcript of the tape, and I'll be glad to send you ... Thank you very much.

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(setting up television cameras, etc.)

: Okay, smile, you're on television. Rolling.

: What is the title of this one, so we can start ...

RR: This is Dirt Shrine.

: Okay, keep that in mind as we go around it. The ball and chain are all ceramic with photographs stencilled or silk-screened on it, is that right?

RR: Right, the clay glaze transfer, and one of the miracles of this piece is the fact that such high-tech clay could be convinced to look as organic as it was when it fell off the mountain.

: It's a long way from the mud that it started out to be.

RR: That's right, so I went over it very naively, thinking I was you know, going to actually make things with my own hands, and I guess I was about 150 years late, you know - and even pots, they don't make them quite like that, and so I had to trick the high-tech clay, ~~xxxxxxx~~ which is a lot more durable of course, 3000 years or something, to all infra-red, ultraviolet, all the enemies of art, and it's ready for it. I had to trick it into resembling itself or at least maybe just a neighbor, you know, of the mountain.

: Do you make a maquette of these different elements and different other materials, and then translate them by casting?

RR: I went over to Japan for the project with a series of my own photographs that I don't know, superficially I picked as typical, atypical, you know, disagreeing categories. I didn't want to go over without anything, because I wanted it to be a combination of American, Japanese interaction. And so, I first went through a crash course in chemistry with the factory about what you can do, what you can't do, and everything, to be surrounded by 85 people who know more about what you can do and can't do than you could ever learn, was a little bit intimidating, and so I needed a little space there, so I went to Osaka and took photographs that I could then blend with the photographs that I had brought from America, and during that trip I had a notebook in my pocket, and I don't know where it came from (I know where the notebook came from), but I didn't know where the idea came from, but I was desperate, and sometimes like being desperate, you know, provides a lot of originality. And so, there was a little drawing about that big there, that explained this whole project, which actually became quite a monster, technically, physically for months to come. And like the fact that this chain here, I mean, nobody's ever done that before.

: Casting a ceramic chain?

RR: Yeah, that worked. And all the hardware works, like this screws out. See that? And you know, when you're learning, one side shrinks where the other grows, right? And there's a nut and bolt

on that, and that hackle works. The other piece ...

: Let's cut here and take it over there.

The source material for these Japanese clay works comes from a variety of places and a lot of photography, and to look at the piece as you must see it on television, it must look very much as if these are photo- tions and mounted on board. This stuff is rock hard ceramic fired at 3000° and is no way going to peel off its backing, and it's here for quite a while. At the same time, it has all the qualities that photography can capture-- moments or textures and a micro-focus as you can see over there, things that one would find in this scavenger-esthetic eyeball looking over the contemporary world. It's a combination of things that make me feel that this might be called the Revenge of Transients, but I'm not going to retitle it. Bob, maybe you can help me out here, and you talk about the work, or anything else you want to talk about. I just wanted to let people know that this is ceramic.

RR: You're certainly right about my fascination with the fact that I like fragility and temporary aspects that the movement of life is the only thing that keeps us either both right or wrong, and so to be working with a material that boasted of living 3000 years is very intimidating. But I wasn't sure what to do about it, and so I just dealt with it just the way I would a piece of trash that I would pick up in New York City, you know, just outside the gallery, supposing it would too. So, as you pointed out, the funny kind of reversal of esthetics to treat something that

supposedly would last for 3000 years as opposed to something that you treat naturally. So like all my information here is up to date within the last maybe four months.

: What do you mean, the information is up to date.

RR: Well, I think of art as communication.

: I was going to say there's a common denominator ~~that-determines~~
permanence of the
to the/stone which is still man-made ...

RR: So my iconography happens, you know, with a world full of actors, and I'm not there one day and I am the next. I just lost a great photograph over in the corner of and .

: You didn't have your camera?

RR: I just didn't carry it. I was worried about the paintings and the show and everything, cause usually I carry a camera, cause I know the ~~perfect~~ photographs, that perfect moment, doesn't hang around. It's very fragile, and today of course it's gone. There was this bust - a real bust, a double bust - there was this store was going out of business because they lost their lease , (that's one bust), But there was this mannequin half-bust, with two busts, and like it had two brazieres on; one of them had been half ripped off, and she's standing there saying, Going out of business, lost my lease. And they didn't say she is saying that, the store is saying that. I don't know who bought those two dirty bras, but it sure screwed up my photographs. You really do have to take it, that's what I'm talking about, / there was like
 this box of candy over there -
this happened at a particular fair that was going on just that moment, you know, and I had to be there. But then that turned

into, as part of my palette, just as authentic and conventional as a set of winter Newton, you know because I had my, I don't want to say jellybeans - I won't - I had my jellyballs, you know, in green, red, blue and white ...

: Let's cut and start over.

RR: Start over?

: No, I'm not worried about that, but we're running out of tape. Just come to a stop, so we can make a cut. Alright, I have a speech I'm about to make.

: Why don't you have him pick up the pole as you lift up the panel, or you pick up the pole or something. Or I will, or something.

: ... and working with them is that we sort of want a family that's working together, and the particular qualities that in American we'll bring into this contemporary creative mix, I think the humor and sense of the unpredictable respect for the evanescent quality is something, I mean you can always make mechanical things work mechanically, but to make them subservient to a spirit of play seems to me is the overall message that the work ...

well, the play of life, that whatever it is that makes a person turn his head in one direction or another is something very vital to what we as people are about. It would seem to me that that's what they were looking for you to bring to their enormous machinery that could do anything technically, but couldn't do it impulsively at the same time.

RR: There's a lot of almost sort of constipation that happens with information. The more certain you are, the less apt you are to move.

Because that implies that there's a certain exaggeration of the value of being right, and that has nothing to do with the mobility of forces being right.

: Well, particularly it seems to me that in the esthetic sense, so much is out of the corners of one's eyes, or one's eye, or momentary or very brief, the experience of unity or esthetic perception, has to be caught by someone who can move at that speed, and you have to be somewhat *ish* to do that.

RR: Well, I used to complain about my lack of memory by saying I have periphery vision, but I think it's gotten more acute now, and now I've got a kaleidoscopic memory, which gets you in a lot more trouble.

: Well, kaleidoscopic memory - not just for your, I mean this is some racial memory here such as personal memory; you're dealing with images that have a much wider set of associations than a family album would have, and your peripheral vision is taking in 360° around the world.

RR: And more.

: Well, on that note, barring any unforeseen comments, I want to thank you for joining us. I want to urge our audience to visit, see Bob Rauschenberg's work on Green Street til the 29th of January - at 3 galleries. It's been renamed, not Green Street anymore.

RR: We didn't talk about the, it's called The Strip. The Kabal American Zephyr series has its own mystery, and each one of those pieces is like a short story, so that might be interesting

: Well, you'll have to decipher those icons. We have shown you some of them. You really should see them for yourselves. For myself, it's been a great experience to both be with you and to see the work. You know, you use reproduction, I've seen your work in reproduction, I've seen the original sometimes.

RR: I sometimes use my work in reproduction.

: Okay, that's a subject for another program. Goodnight everybody.

RR: Goodnight everybody.

RR: Give me a break. Let me look like I'm more special than you.

: Oh, I've been really trying to do that. I'm always upstaging. That's only because I wanted to make it come alive.

RR: You wanted the show to be interesting.

: Partly that, and partly because right now, you know, you want it to be maximally engaged. One last shot, if I may. I'd like to have both of us sitting there, looking at the video, because I wanted to ask you a couple of questions. I find the video to be such an incredible ... Do you mind?

RR: I don't know - sort of.

: Okay, then we'll wrap it. Thank you very much, and I'll send you the copy, and I'll call you and let you know when you'll be on the air - probably next week.

RR: He can talk to you about the video - he made it.

TVB: It's your video they're looking at.

: I'll go talk to my dealers, so we can afford a show like this next year.

(End)