

## RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Saff, Don, and unidentified T [Thomas Buehler?] / Personal Interview, 1989

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG  
12/21/89 CAPTIVA ISLAND, FL

R: (after a couple of minutes of small talk) I had an exhibition in Zurich, one of the most beautiful galleries in the world, and I've been in a few ... I ran out of work and had to borrow some back from collectors. While we were there, East Berlin opened up and we had been negotiating for months, very complex negotiations, about doing a simultaneous exhibition between East and West Berlin. West Berlin was even going to pay for the exhibition in East Berlin. We finally got as close as East Berlin saying we could have back-to-back shows (one after the other) but that was unacceptable to the ROCI concept of uniting people.

(pause to quiet the dogs)

D: They kept saying little steps, little steps. They were just out of touch, I think, with the people.

T: In that way you were in far better touch with the people.

R: (Nods) So when it opened up ...we were able to in 1 1/2 days, negotiate for an entire East Berlin ROCI show. Our time schedule is very tight now because we already have the date set for Malaysia.

T: Which is when?

R: May 24. And so we set that up. So all this work has to be made.

T: While you were there, did you go around and do what you usually do to prepare for a show?

R: Yes. We did video and photographs, the negatives came in for the screens today and we're printing them now.

D: (Don discusses prominent East German author doing opening for the show.)

R: (discussing cooperation with well-known writers, including Octavio Paz) Once you get on the diet of Pulitzer Prize winners, it's hard to get off.'

D: (Don also mentions a Chilean author)

T: How many more shows do you have time for before the Washington wrap?

R: This year's going to be really crowded because we're not sure about Africa yet. We have the East Berlin thing, then to Malaysia. I spent a month in Malaysia, Borneo, slept with the headhunters. We're pretty thorough. ...We would have liked to have gone to Africa, but we don't have it organized yet.

D: (explaining the complexity of organizing the show) South Africa is the one country he will not show in. You cannot as a visual artist exhibit where a musician would play. You have to go to the government facility. And if you use that, there's always the chance that it will be misinterpreted.

R: And it's not furniture.

T: ROCI got started in 1985..

R: I was working on the concept at least three years before that. It wasn't until I went to China that I felt a really big surge. I felt, I don't know, guilty, responsible for the oppression there. I felt that if there was anything art could do to make it possible for these people not to have to get five people to decide whether you could go 15 kilometers to visit your mother or grandmother, something's got to break loose here.

T: Why did you feel responsible?

R: (incredulous) Because I'm a human being.

T: In Barbara Rose's book, you said, and I'm quoting now, "I had decided when I was in the Navy that I was going to continue with the psycho work. Then I decided I got too involved. It's one thing to talk to a piece of tin and it's another thing to have your heart broken by every patient you talk to."

R: It's the same me.

T: You're doing something that really makes a difference.

R: I think I always did. I don't think I was able to emotionally or politically do it on the scale that ROCI has. I mean, I had to grow up a little bit. These were feelings I've had probably since I was a child. Because before that remark, I was going to be a preacher. But I decided I wasn't going to spend all my energy looking for evil.

T: So you had the idea around 1982?

D: It was 1982 that we were in China working on the world's oldest paper mill.

R: Right, and I had the idea three years before that.

D: So it goes back, 79 or 80.

R: Right. I had to organize it. My first extravaganza was that I went through a list of big corporations and made a list of those that I thought weren't doing anything. And we started sending out letters. How could these people be against peace and art? I was even going to paint a Pan Am plane. Thank God that didn't come about. I had a list of rather hoary things that I would be willing to do. In Japan I contacted the largest advertising agency and they didn't understand the concept at all. Nobody came through. It was naive of me to think that these companies weren't responsible for some negative activities in spite of their up frontness. The only way ROCI could exist was for me to pay for the whole thing.

T: Why were you willing to go so far?

R: We didn't want the government sponsorship.

R: Well, a lot of people believe in things, but they're not willing to invest their entire personal ...

D: Fortunes.

T: Well, not just that, themselves, their time.

R: I know, I know. It's a shame to say that I'm glad this is ROCI's final year. It has been exhausting.

T: More so than you thought it would be?

R: I don't know. I have been working so constantly on this. I have no idea what I thought it would have been. But it's been more, no matter what I would have thought, it's been a lot more. But so have been the rewards - politically, spiritually. I don't think ROCI's been one place that it hasn't changed entire attitudes about people and their lives. I don't say that braggartly. It's just been the case. I mean, in China, it was extraordinary, the response. Certainly in Russia, Tibet, they had never seen anything like it.

D: In China, there must have been 7,000 to 10,000 a day to see the show.

T: I would guess the same amount in Moscow.

R: It was.

D: And then they, the artists, talked about art before Rauschenberg and after Rauschenberg in China.

R: It stopped the dynasties (laughs).

D: It's got people agreeing, it's got people being heard. People were coming up saying, "You have no idea what this means to us. You have no idea." "

R: They were also coming from Afghanistan.

D: They were also coming from Azerbaijain, Armenia.

T: Salakhov's wife is Azerbaijaini.

D: So is he.

T: Well, they're opposites.

D: Then she's Armenian because he's Azerbaijaini.

T: I've never been to one of your big United States shows. But I would have to guess that these are a lot different - the ROCI shows.

R: Well, yeah. Because most of my United States shows are in sophisticated areas where people move in because they can't afford not to be there or they're personal friends or they know what to expect or they have to be seen there. And the whole ROCI scheduling has been addressing sensitive areas politically, emotionally, spiritually and artistically. And I don't think any country that we've ever been in knew what to expect. That has the same freshness that I used to be able to have in the United States. They don't know what to expect.

T: In that sense, the ROCI show almost seems like something you can't stop.

R: Well, I have to now. I think the coronation of the ROCI show will be the acceptance of it ... by being shown in the National Gallery. And that would be the United States' recognition that this had happened. What do you think about that Don? And it's not a final thing. They have never given a one-man show to a living artist before. I even had it written in my contract that if I die,

the show is canceled.

D: No, the National Gallery has a rule. And one of Bob's efforts, aside from the exhibition, was to help the people at the National Gallery who want to change that rule to help them do that.

R: They cooperated. But they needed the push.

T: In a way, it seems very natural to culminate there, to finish up there. For this to be the big, rousing finish to this tour. But in another way, it almost seems to be the antithesis for you personally.

R: OK. The National is working on a program to take that show and travel. So I feel like I will be, well, most of my resources over the past few years have gone into that. I had to sell some of my most precious artworks. Not mine, but like early Twombles, early Warhols, Jasper Johns because ... what's a coffer?

D: It's like a receptacle for keeping things. Also it's indentations in the ceilings.

R: Well, we blew out the ceilings (laughs). But every place we went the response was so much more exaggerated, extraordinary and satisfying than I could have possibly imagined. Don't you agree, Don? It was overwhelming.

D: Everyone was surprised again.

T: After going through these five years of surprise, you're bringing it back to a familiar audience.

R: But they haven't seen these works. I think the people of America need an education about how the rest of the world is - possibly, more seriously than some of the countries we've been to. And with the videos that show...

T: That was my favorite part of the show, the video verité.

D: And you notice it's not just Bob working in countries. Just raw footage.

R: Don't you think this country has to cut back just a little bit, too? We can't afford to be political snobs. Life is not that simple.

T: When you go into these other countries and, I don't know how else to say it, sample those countries, and come back to do work based on that country, what kind of feedback do you get from people?

R: Where?

T: Anywhere. When they see what you've created about their country, does it ring true for them?

R: It has so far, I think. Because, you see, part of that exposure is that ... I have another project going on, sorry to think in such tangents, but I have another project going on "In and Out of City Limits," where I go to a city, and I take photographs and I come back and show them their city. And the result is, because it is art, and they're pretty good photographs, it makes them look around in their own city ... "I know where that is," they say, "I just live three blocks from there!" And there it is, hanging on the wall. I think that familiarity with their own environment enhances their own dignity. Because here they're seeing it outside of that, they're not just driving past it every day. John Cage once said that it's such a waste to just get to where

you're going because the trip is so much more interesting. So what I'm giving them is the trip to where they are.

T: Reminds me of when you told Barbara Rose that on leaves you used to hitchhike until you thought it was about half over and then go back on the other side of the road.

R: I didn't know that was avante-garde (laughs).

D: I imagine that question goes to the heart of what ROCI is all about. When we travel around Bob would take photographs of found objects and it's almost like he discovers work. These people who ignored things look at them like they're absolute poetry.

T: I think it even works for people who aren't from the country. Some of my friends in Tampa are from Cuba. Even though I've never been there, when I saw your work from Cuba, I got this sense, I didn't even have to be told which country they were from, I automatically knew.

R: Well, that's my job. That's what I have to give into. That's one of the things that lets me look forward to this National show. Because I spent years on that kind of yielding. I'm not sorry at all. I wonder what else I would do?

T: If you weren't an artist?

R: No, no, no. Not if I weren't an artist. If I weren't focusing, going to these different places and yielding. All kinds of other developments by trying to absorb and respond to the landscape, the politics, the sensibilities of that particular country. And that's a real energy rise there. But there's something more abstract, a hunger and a curiosity after you've spent so many years on a single project, that doesn't disgrace the project because I'm sort of looking forward to a bank of work to turn over to the National so that they can continue this education, so that I can see what else I want to do. I mean, I'm 64 years old and I'm full of ideas. And everything has been put on hold because ROCI is priority. It's proven to be the successful judgment. It has almost accomplished what it was supposed to have done.

T: When you talk about yielding...

R: I have to disappear. I can't have an external force going out when I'm trying to understand, digest, absorb, whichever of those words you like. It calls for my yielding any preconceptions that I might have. That's why we don't consider, I mean we do go the most extreme areas with ROCI, but we don't go there with any intention of controlled change in mind.

T: Do you think you could have done this 30 years ago?

R: No. The sensitivity has to develop. I mean, 30 years ago, I probably thought I knew what I wanted to do, and I probably did, and I probably did do it. Or I wouldn't be in this position right now in art history. But I don't think that when I was fresh from Black Mountain College that I could have survived an odyssey like this.

T: It's almost like you had to empty things out of yourself in order to absorb it.

R: No, I had to accept them. Like the photography has helped me throughout my painter, sculptor career by giving me an excuse to see how the light changes. And small things like that make a great difference in your perception.

T: When the National Gallery takes over the show, is there any chance you'll remain involved in it in some way.

R: I don't know. Next week's work is more complicated than that (laughs) to make beautiful paintings.

T: But I've heard you're still interested in performance art.

R: Of course. You see, I haven't given up anything. Now that sometimes drives me crazy. But it's a civilized insanity. This work and all these situations at once. I have a new corroboration with Trisha Brown and I haven't the slightest idea what to do about it. But I've observed that the last three pieces that I've collaborated with her on are all silver, grey and white. And I thought that she should have something in her repertoire, that she should have a really colorful piece. And I suggested Jim Rosenquist, but he was busy having his baby. So I said, OK, Trisha that's it. She usually calls me about 2 in the morning, so I'm pretty ripe. You're ready to say yes to nearly anything. I said Trisha, you're going to get a color piece you won't believe. But Jim would be so beautiful for stage work. And so would Roy Lichtenstein. They have the sense of scale and performance.

T: And they're both multi-dimensional artists.

R: Exactly. They're both painters, sculptors.

T: You're one of the few people who seems to be able to go back and forth between mediums. You've always been an avid photographer, involved in performance art. And now you seem ready to go back to it, rather than confining yourself...

R: I'm not going to back to it, I never left it. I don't want to get too familiar with what I'm doing.

T: Why is that?

R: Because I'd be a stylist, like a lot of artists that I respect but don't like.

D: (discusses latest Vanity Fair with Aidan Salakhov, talks about how Salakhov used the Rauschenberg contract for all the other deals made with outside artists since then) They had no idea of what a contract was supposed to be.

R: Or even what a museum is supposed to look like!

(we discuss the lighting from West Germany, plywood from Berlin and other materials brought in for the Russian show)

T: I wondered if you all just left the materials there. ... Can you tell me, when you do the ROCI show in each country, how do you get from going over there to do you work to the show actually opening and running its course. How does it work?

R: Well, I went to Russia three times in one year.

T: Oh, so some you go to more than once.

R: Yes, and in Chile I went from one end of Chile to the other and had a bunch of people ... doing this. Cuba was once, but I went from one end to the other.

T: How did you find Cuba?

R: It's right down there.

D: Just south of here. (Laughter)

R: How did YOU find it?

T: Very funny.

R: Well, frankly it's terrible. The country's variations require ... (wanders)

T: Then do you come back here to actually do your work?

R: Yes. There are certain processes that have to be done here, not in the back of a Volkswagen or something. And there's a period of interpreting and digesting the information. And then the writers in each country need time to understand what the project is. We almost got in trouble with (two Russian writers' names). We had two favorite writers and one I had already collaborated with. It's all quite delicate and it cannot be done in a rush. It's not like working for National Geographic.

T: Do you read about the countries? Do you take in any more information than what you pick up while you're there?

R: Well, of course. You have to. You can't understand the history of Cuba driving from one end to the other and meeting Castro.

T: When you take in all these bits of information from each country, what's your goal?

R: I try to prepare myself. In the early day's Don's son, Jeff would prepare a concise history of each country that was part of my preparedness for each country and it helped. You get as much information as you can before you go to each country. But then you don't go there looking for souvenirs and relics.

T: What do you look for?

R: The immediate condition. The way the sun shines, the way it doesn't, the attitudes of the people. It's an artistic strain, because you have to go to each country totally vulnerable and exposed. None of the countries we've ever been to have we ever exercised the fact that I was me. With the exception of possibly Russia. It helped us a lot to get around. Russia was very reticent to let us go around in certain places.

T: I want to make that clear, because I think some people take a look at ROCI and say, Oh, Bob Rauschenberg goes to China and picks up a rock, a bag, a tire, comes home and (thppppt) here's this work. It's much more complicated than that for you.

R: It is much more complicated. In the first place, if you want to talk about China, we went into a province that had not been opened up to aliens, they called us aliens, and did a remarkable performance in direct collaboration with them. What was that other situation in China?

D: Well, in the place in China, there had been no one in there for 40 years. In the (?) province, there were at least 150 people following us wherever we went. They followed us, looked at us, touched our clothes. I mean, they were amazed that anyone would work so hard of their own choice. Bob wasn't forced to be there, wasn't forced to work. He was there of his own choice. It was totally, totally different from anything they had ever seen.



T: For them, you may as well have been from outer space.

R: I think that's why they called us aliens. (laughs)

D: The same thing with Cuba, basically. They were totally amazed we were there. I mean, once they realized we weren't Russian, it was like, why were we there, how were we allowed to be there, how could we get anything in there? Twenty-nine years now.

T: It's so sad the way they worship the United States so much. In Cuba, a pair of blue jeans cost \$120 and people will eat eggs and bread for a month just to be able to buy that. And it just breaks your heart to even talk to them about it.

R: Well, it's terrible that they want blue jeans (laughs).

T: It's terrible that they suffer so much for so little, for something that doesn't mean anything.

R: I asked Castro to come over. And I said, I'm sure you could bring your own boat. And he said, It's the first time in 29 years ago that I've been invited to America.

D: That's exactly what he said. He invited Bob to his...well, what would you call that? His palace?

T: His place on Pine Island?

R: Yes, that's right.

D: He said, you worked so hard, you have to rest now.

R: He said I'm not going to let you out of the country unless you spend at least three days at my house.

T: A great host.

R: We got along very well.

T: You've been able to do things by doing the ROCI show that, not only as an artist you wouldn't have been able to do, but as a human being you never could have dreamed of.

R: Right. And no diplomat, no political person could have either. That's the purity of art. It doesn't have any walls.

T: You still can make a statement with it. You still can show reality with it.

R: I miss your line. Where in history wasn't art reality?

T: What I'm saying is that for some people, reality can be just as condemning. For Castro, for some countries, any perception of their country that's not cleaned up, sanitized, can be very dangerous.

R: Those are the places we went. The attitudes, the nature, the sincerity, we somehow satisfied the hunger that one part of the world has for the other.

T: Have you made friends in each of these countries? Have you come close to these people?



R: Yes.

T: Is there any one country?

R: Tibet.

T: Why?

R: I don't know.

T: Well, I know that when China took over Tibet in the 1950s, it was still a feudal society. I have friends who came out of there who say that when the Chinese chased us out, we really stepped from the 19th century into the 20th Century.

R: There were all the aesthetics, I think. The Tibetans pick up a rock like a pick up a rock and look at it and appreciate it for what it is. They don't have a hierarchy of value, whether it's a nail you find, or, this sounds too simplistic, but there is no big value judgment made on what is worth something and what is not worth something as you have in some civilizations.

T: I understand what you're saying. In other words, why should a diamond or a piece of gold be more valuable than a rock by the side of the road?

R: It isn't.

T: No, but we attach that kind of value to it. Is that what makes you feel close to them than to other countries?

R: I think so. I think that somehow, it may seem subversive, but I've spent most of my life trying to make everyone look at everything.

T: Subversive?

D: You can't top that, Bob (laughs). Everyone look at everything, that is so true.

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