

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Rick Begneaud

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Byron Richard “Rick” Begneaud, Jr. conducted by Sara Sinclair on May 28 and 29, 2015. These interviews are part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Rick Begneaud

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: May 28, 2015

Q: Today is May 28, 2015. This is Sara Sinclair with Rick Begneaud and we are at 381 Lafayette Street in New York City. To begin let's talk about you and your very, very early life. So can you just tell me where and when you were born, please?

Begneaud: I was born in Lafayette, Louisiana, November 13, 1957 at a little hospital which no longer exists, right next to—not the original Begneaud's Pharmacy, but the second Begneaud's Pharmacy, which was in downtown Lafayette. Dr. Bienvenu. I don't know why I remember that, Dr. Bienvenu was my mom's doctor.

Q: What are some of your earliest memories?

Begneaud: I guess what just flashed for me too is being—we lived downtown. We lived close to downtown because my parents lived in the house behind where my dad's parents lived on University [Avenue]. Most of my other friends grew up more in other kinds of areas—not urban, but more neighborhoods. This was downtown. There were street people and stuff. What that meant for Lafayette back in those days isn't a big deal, but even though it was a small city, it was a little bit of city life for me, growing up there. And I was always doing something to get in trouble because I guess I was bored or something like that. One afternoon when I was little I ate

all the pills out of the medicine cabinet. I remember having to go back to that hospital where I was born and getting my stomach pumped, which was very miserable.

That was an interesting time to grow up. I spent a lot of time by myself growing up because there was not much—I had a couple of other friends in that neighborhood, but not many. It was a big deal when my mom would bring me to one of her friends' who actually lived out in a nice little neighborhood someplace to play and hang out and spend the night sometimes.

Q: So what would you get up to on your own?

Begneaud: Well, when I got my bike I was always going places I was not supposed to go because they were really trying to keep tabs on me. It wasn't like a neighborhood where you're just out in the woods. It was busy streets and the occasional hobo or something.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I didn't understand what that was all about. But it was all just fun and games, I guess. I was always building stuff or making ponds and all my little army men and stuff like that.

I was really not a good student because at the time I had dyslexia and I didn't know what that was. I just thought I really had a hard time reading and stuff like that. So I remember coming home from school and my mom sitting in the driveway just crying, shaking her head, just like,

well, this is not good. Yes, so I was never a good student. Then I went to Ascension Day School, which was also downtown. And—

[INTERRUPTION]

Begneaud: Yes, I went to Ascension Day School where we had to wear little uniforms. Sort of like green and blackish plaid shirts with navy blue pants. I was kind of a cut-up there. I met this other friend, Daniel Kraft, in first grade. And we were trouble. So by fifth grade they were like, okay, one of you guys has to leave school and that was me. So I went to a public school downtown for half a semester before my parents actually did move to the good neighborhood. It was during that little half semester where I actually got called Byron. My dad is Byron Richard Begneaud and I'm Byron Richard Begneaud Junior. So I went by Byron for a while and I was like, eh, this is confusing. So anyway we finally moved to the country. So yes, that was an interesting little ride there, I suppose.

Q: And what was Lafayette like?

Begneaud: It was kind of slow back then. Laid back. It was very different than it is now because now it's way more populated. Every sort of restaurant or chain kind of thing you can think of. It was a cool little town. It was comfortable. One of the things I used to do growing up was when I'd go to my grandmother's house—I called her Nanny [Dora Rauschenberg, née Dora Carolina Matson]. Bob [Rauschenberg, born Milton Ernest Rauschenberg] and my mom's [Janet Begneaud, née Rauschenberg] mother.



Rauschenberg with his son Christopher, mother Dora, nephew Rick Begneaud, and sister Janet Begneaud, late 1980s or 1990s. Work in background is *Navajo Roll (Shiner)* (1986). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

My grandfather, who I called Pop [Ernest Rauschenberg], died when I was I think seven. I was either five or seven, I can't remember. Anyway I used to go there and had a good friend, Chuck Bernard, across the street. We were best pals. So it was fun to go to my grandmother's, to go to Nanny's house and play around. I got to spend a fair amount of time over there. That was one of the bigger aspects of growing up when I still lived downtown. Nanny would get a switch after me once in a while—me and Chuck would get in trouble, she would go in the tree and get a little switch.

[Laughter]

Q: Wow.

Begneaud: I get goose bumps thinking about that, how much that hurt. I'd catch one of those in the back of the—she didn't always get me. But—it was the threat of that little switch. Plus we

used to run crazy over there. She pretty much let us do anything we wanted in that place. Yes, that was interesting, it was fun.

Q: Were you raised with religion?

Begneaud: Yes. Went to church three times a week.

Q: Three times a week, wow.

Begneaud: We went to Sunday school in the morning, which led into the main service. Sunday night was Bible study. Wednesday night was also Bible study. So by the time I moved out of there when I was twenty-seven, I figured for twenty-seven years I went three times a week—that was a lot of years of church. When I moved to California I bailed out of church. It just wasn't making any sense to me. But yes, I put in a lot of time going to church. Church of Christ. My mom still goes and I go with her sometimes out of—she looks at me and I'm like, "I know, I know. I'll go with you. I don't really want to go, but I'll go with you." I grew up with half the people there. But most of the kids I grew up with are out of there. Moved some other place or are just not going I suppose.

Q: Is that the same kind of church that your mom went to when she was growing up?

Begneaud: I don't—yes they must have gone to Church of Christ in Port Arthur [Texas]. I've never asked that, I never thought about that. But I'm assuming it is. I don't think they would have changed their religions when they moved from Texas to Lafayette.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Yes. I would have to think so.

Q: What was your grandmother like? What was Dora like, other than a switch toting—[laughs]

Begneaud: Well she wasn't really switch toting—she only did that a few times, but it left a searing memory. She was really sweet. What's interesting—I don't really remember hanging out with Pop, her husband, that much. I remember him some, but the majority of my memories are with her by herself at the house. I think that was partly why I got to go there a lot too because she was by herself. She was really sweet. She pretty much let me do everything. She didn't teach me to drive, but when I was probably eleven, I drove everywhere. She would sit in the driver's seat and I would sit in the middle. I would steer and run the accelerator. The only thing she got to run was the brake.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: So she had her foot on the brake and I drove everywhere from the middle seat. I don't think you could do that anymore. I never thought about it, it was crazy. But I drove everywhere.

Every time we got in the car, I drove. A few times we almost went through the windshield with her hitting the brake pretty hard.

But she would kind of let me do whatever I wanted to do around the house. She was always cooking great food. Even when I was in college there was always either a Wednesday or a Thursday night, depending, and she'd make fried chicken. She always wanted me to eat my spinach so she would just put a handful of cheese in there. It was really good, but it was really rich. She thought that was the only way I'd eat my spinach.

She was just genuinely a sweet person. She was always kind of laughing and she was painting, sometimes she went to the women's—I forgot what club she was in. A women's club or bridge club or something like that. Did you ever see any of those paintings at Janet's house? Did she ever break some of those out?

Q: She told me about the paintings.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: I don't think I saw them.

Begneaud: Yes. The last three times I've been down there—they're up in a closet. I keep meaning to take them out. A lot of them are hunting or ducks or something. Clowns and all kinds of things. They're not great, but they're fun.

[Laughter]

Q: Was there other extended family around?

Begneaud: Not on our side. Not on the Rauschenberg side, but on my dad's side. My dad had one brother and he had five kids. So there were on that side the cousins and uncles and all that stuff. I didn't really hang out with those guys that much. We did the obligatory Christmas every year and the occasional Thanksgiving. When I was little I guess I hung out with them a little bit more. But I didn't really grow up with those guys so much.

Q: Okay. And what did you hear about your Uncle Bob when you were growing up? What are your first memories of him? Either of being with him or of knowing him?

Begneaud: Yes. Not a lot. I was a little oblivious to what was really going on with Bob. I knew he was—he would come to town once in a while and he would sometimes come alone, but sometimes he would come with a Volkswagen bus full of dancers and stuff. I remember once he came with a kinkajou, a little monkey thing he had, and they stayed at my grandmother's house. But I was pretty young then. That was probably in the early sixties. I was probably—I almost have to think that was after my grandfather died because I don't think Bob would have come with a crew when my grandfather was around. So it must have been '65-ish or '64, -5, -6, or something like that. I'm guessing.



Members of Merce Cunningham Dance Company visiting Rauschenberg's mother in Lafayette, Louisiana, 1962. Pictured: Merce Cunningham, Carolyn Brown, Shareen Blair, Janet Begneaud, Viola Farber, David Tudor, Robert Rauschenberg, Dora Rauschenberg. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

And then we came to New York. My mom and I came to New York early on. I remember staying here when I was little and that was a big deal. New York was so very different than Lafayette. I remember one of the—I forgot who it was—someone took me to the store one time and didn't tell my mom. She went into sheer panic, looking all over the house and then finally going up on the roof. And it was like, oh no, I don't even want to look over to see—

[Laughter]

Begneaud: —where I may be.

Q: Where he might be.

Begneaud: But we used to come to New York, not a lot, but every few years. Bob would invite my mom for something.

Now I guess what sticks out most is there was a painting over my grandmother's fireplace, an old one—I guess it's an old fabric piece. It's still around. We still have that—it's really beautiful. I just sort of grew up with that because I spent so much time at my grandmother's house. That piece—it was like one little gold leaf piece and I think the one my grandmother had was in a little white almost shadow box. A tiny little white thing. And that was the one thing—when my grandmother died, Bob said to my mom, “The only thing I want in this house is that little piece back.” So I haven't seen it since then. It's somewhere in the archives I'm sure.

But yes, so I didn't really know—I kind of knew he was an artist, but I didn't really know what that meant back in those days. There were artists I'm sure in Lafayette, but nobody I was paying attention to and that really didn't mean a whole lot to me. I'd hear my grandmother talk about Milton. It was always Milton. She still never called him Bob until the day she left. And then I'd hear my parents talk about it. My dad would never really—not until later—he always called him Janet's brother. Referring to Bob would be like, Janet's brother. He never called him Bob or Milton. So I'm trying to think when it was really—I suppose it was the first time my grandmother and my mom and I went to Captiva [Florida]. Bob didn't even have a house yet. We stayed at the South Seas Plantation. I was little. That must have been 1970 or something. I was maybe twelve or thirteen years old. I remember staying down there and fishing and catching red snapper and hanging out and that was kind of the first time that I hung out with Bob in a way that I started to understand what his deal was. Not that I didn't know he was an artist before, but understanding what sort of artist he was and where he was in the art world. Just the beginning of that, I suppose.

Q: How do you think you started to understand that? What was it that you were seeing or hearing or—

Begneaud: I think it was more—because I always heard stories about Bob traveling. Bob would call sometimes and he would talk to me on the phone. He'd be somewhere and he would always tell me what he was up to, where he was, whom he met—things that were really interesting to me. I knew Bob was buying a place in Florida at that time. New York still kind of freaked me out back when I was little, coming here. I was not ever really comfortable here when I was younger, even when I would come and visit when I was older. I would stay for a few days. My good friend, Jimmy Macdonell, who I grew up with—bought a—or he didn't own the place. He lived on Mercer Street. And back in the seventies was not like it is here now.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Walking over by myself to go there was kind of like—coming from Lafayette, where everything is pretty safe and easy down there, to lots of characters on the street here back in those days. Then, of course when I started coming in I guess it was probably my late teens and early twenties there was a lot going on in this house. Like a lot. And the same thing when I would go to Captiva. I remember going to Captiva once with my friend Chuck and my grandmother came and my mom was there and that was the first time I met Hummingbird [Takahashi]. You know Hummingbird?

Q: I know Hisachika [“Sachika” Takahashi]. [Note: Hummingbird is Takahashi’s son.]

Begneaud: Hisachika. So he was—

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: —this big.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: I think Chuck and I were fourteen. Thirteen, fourteen or something. Anyway, we got one of Bob’s little Volkswagens and we went cruising. We didn’t have our driver’s licenses or anything. And Bob would let us have cocktails.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I remember we had a party at the original print shop or something like that and it was a crazy party. My grandmother had left and I remember going back and the room spinning. I was like, “Whoa, okay.” Sitting there with my grandmother like, “I’m going to bed now.” But that was the thing about going to Florida, Bob was always—within reason he’d let you do whatever. I can’t think of many things or many times where there was any sort of, “You can do this, but don’t do that.”

Q: Right.

Begneaud: The earliest thing I remember Bob telling me not to do was—he and I were by ourselves. We were in New York about to get on a subway. We were standing at the subway and he points at me and he goes, “You see those tracks?” He goes, “Don’t ever touch those. They’ll make you cry.”

[Laughter]

Begneaud: But there weren’t many things Bob ever told me not to do.

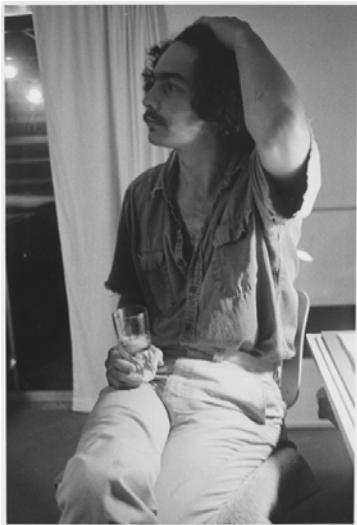
Q: Right.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: You said there was a lot going on in this house and there was a lot going on at Captiva. Could you talk about those early memories of both places?

Begneaud: Yeah, I remember Captiva more than here. There were always a lot of people here, on the third floor and the kitchen, by the front of the big stove. There was always something going on. And other artists—I don’t even remember who they were when I was younger. But in Captiva, I remember there was always stuff happening. A lot of times there was a film crew there doing an interview with Bob or filming him working. There were lots of folks around. In those

days I was either cooking or I was going and getting food and shopping, going to Bailey's [General Store] and getting the groceries or getting a giant shopping list of stuff to come back and put together. It just seemed like a lot of activity all the time. Of course Bob had a crew of people working there. [Robert] Bob Petersen and Bradley [J. Jeffries] and on and on and on, lots of folks who were there all the time. And then on top of that—so-and-so's coming in for ABC [American Broadcasting Company] or so-and-so—so there was a lot of movement happening.



Rick Begneaud, Captiva, Florida, ca. 1978.
Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg
Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Attributed
to Terry Van Brunt

My thing was that I started cooking dinner for those guys. They'd be off filming a lot of times and I would be cooking. And it'd be like, okay it's midnight. I'd call over there and I'd go, "Everything's going to be ready in a half an hour." Then people would come at maybe one or something and sit down for dinner.

Q: This is a little bit later on then.

Begneaud: It's a little bit later on.

Q: This is when you're how old?

Begneaud: Oh I don't—probably in my twenties when I was cooking.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: But when I was younger, I wasn't really cooking that much.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: But I was running errands and doing stuff, doing small things around the studio and basically goofing around.

Q: And this would be—like you'd go hang out there on summer break during high school or—

Begneaud: Yes, I spent most, almost all my summers there starting when I was about—probably fifteen. We'd get out of school and if Bob wasn't out of town, I'd go to Captiva and I'd spend a month or two in Captiva.

Q: How did that come to be?

Begneaud: Bob would just—I don't know, we talked a fair amount. We started talking more and more on the phone. He would call me from places; I would call him just to check in a fair amount. He would be like, "Just come to Captiva." I would always do something—he would always give me little jobs to do. So I would always come home from the summer with a little check. And sometimes it seemed like a big check. I think one thing kind of led to another where I would start cooking because I was cooking anyway back at home. Or I was beginning to cook anyway. Rita Malveaux, our housekeeper, was an amazing cook. And my mom was a really good cook. My dad was a good cook too, but he'd cook game and stuff like that. Mom cooked the other stuff. So I picked up things and then going to Captiva, Bob was always cooking too. Cooking big giant pots of—he was always cooking something. So I got to learn from Rita, from my mom, from my dad, from Bob, and various other places.

I have a hard time remembering exactly the point when I started cooking, but the more I went down there, the more I would take on these bigger cooking projects. Everybody was kind of on their own for breakfast because that was at whatever time. Some people were up at nine and some people were up at three in the afternoon. There would be some kind of little early evening thing before everybody would wander off to the studio and start working. Then I would plan some bigger dinner. I would go over to the studio and work and hang out with everybody. And then, maybe at ten, ten-thirty, I'd go back to the house and start cooking. Those dinners happened anywhere from, on the early side, eleven at night to two, two-thirty.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Crazy.

[Laughter]

Q: What did you learn about cooking from Bob?

Begneaud: I think what I learned most is the freedom to experiment. I remember once, here, we were making a chili. He sent me off to the store with a list of stuff and I picked up other things too. We came back and he had a big bag of chili powder. So I'm taking this chili powder and kind of sprinkling it and tasting it a little bit. And Bob walked over and he said, "Put the whole thing in there!" I was like, "What?" [Laughs] Just put the whole bag in there? So I was like, whatever. I just put the whole bag in, which seemed to me at the time like a lot of chili powder. The chili turned out fantastic. But Bob was always experimenting. I think you have a preconceived notion of what goes into a dish, whatever you're making, and Bob would always have a few other steps. When he would even make gumbo—and we would make it together—he would do something and I'd go, "Okay, really? You're putting that in there?" And he would just—it was kind of like the way he painted or whatever. He was always experimenting with something.

I think what that taught me was that it doesn't always come out great, but you have the chance for it to come out really great, to turn into something you hadn't planned on. But if you're always doing it the same way versus like my dad when he makes something, he does it exactly the same way each time. The same amount of garlic, the same amount of everything, the same amount of

this. It's all measured out so you get the same result every time, which for some people—he likes it—he wants to know how it's going to turn out. For me I never cook anything the same way ever anymore because it's the process that's fun, experimenting with new things. Sometimes you go, wow, this was amazing. And sometimes you go, eh, that didn't turn out so good. But it usually does.

Plus the other thing with Bob was that he taught me about all these other kinds of ingredients that I'd never heard of before because Bob's going to pick up something from India or something from wherever he was traveling. He came home with new ideas about how to cook also. So that was fun.

Q: What are some of your first memories of hanging out in the studio in Captiva?

Begneaud: Well one, the TV was always on whether Bob was watching it or not. He usually wasn't watching it. It was usually just on. I would just watch Bob work sometimes and he would sort of pace around and look at stuff. But to me he was always pretty decisive in what he was doing. He would ponder for a little bit and look for stuff, but it felt like he always kind of had an idea of moving forward. And he usually had someone around like Bob Petersen back when I first started hanging out in Captiva. I don't know, it was always so fun for me when I got there because I would fly in, someone would pick me up at the airport, and to walk into Bob's studio was always so incredible because you never knew what was going to be happening there. There was always this wonderfully colorful—and you'd just go, “Holy cow, look at this!” It was always just a treat for me to show up in Captiva or here even, sometimes. There was always new

work. Bob was always just so generous about his time and connecting with you. I don't know, I really just loved the whole freedom and excitement and energy and the beauty of what was happening in Captiva. I don't know how to really describe it beyond that.



Rauschenberg's Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1978. Work shown is *Phoenix (Scale)* (1978). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: What was happening in your mind then? How would you have thought about what was happening and maybe now in retrospect how would you describe what was happening?

Begneaud: You mean when I walked into Bob's studio when I was—

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: I don't know. Because earlier you asked me about what I thought about Bob when I was younger. It started to become more and more apparent how important Bob's work was. And of course then I started reading more and hearing more about it along the path the older I got. I don't know how to say what I really felt about it. I always felt like it was something big and

important happening when I walked in. I didn't want to get in the way, but I was very interested to be a part of it, to be a witness to it, so to speak. And I did stuff. I cut stuff up for Bob and ran errands and helped lay this down and move this and—it wasn't anything incredibly important, I don't think, I was doing. But it was important for me to just be there helping, whatever I could do. Bob was always pretty generous about involving me in things. Yes, he had a way about encouraging you to do something without actually saying it. He would do things to encourage you to do this or to do that. Sometimes I would understand, looking back on things, back on a certain time, that Bob had said one thing and he kind of left it open to interpretation hoping that I would get it, whatever he was trying to encourage me to do. Pretty interesting way of communicating. He was unusual in that way.

Q: Do you remember any specific instances of that?

Begneaud: The first thing that pops to mind—it's kind of a silly one, but we were in—where were we? Venezuela? At one of the ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] shows. Bob goes, "Did you bring your harmonica?" I'm like, "No."

[Laughter]

Begneaud: He goes, "Oh! You should go get one." "Oh yes, maybe." So the next day we were out and I thought about that and I go, well, maybe I should go get a harmonica. I don't know why Bob wanted me to get a harmonica. I'll go get a harmonica. So I went to some little shop and I bought a couple of harmonicas. Then the night of the opening—it was a huge thing at—I

can't remember the name of the gallery. As we were leaving Bob goes, "You're bringing your harmonica." I go, "Okay." So we get in and Bob was like, "Go play harmonica if you want. You can play a little bit." I'm like, "Really?" There must be—it seemed like ten thousand people there.

[Laughter]

So I walk up to the second floor and I start just playing whatever. In the shadows there were guys with machine guns. There was some ambient stuff happening in the gallery. That's just one little incident—I'll try and think of some other ones along the way here—

Q: You said that as you became older you started to have a greater sense of who Bob was in the larger world. Do you remember when you first really understood, oh okay?

Begneaud: I don't remember when—but like I said earlier I spent a lot of time at my grandmother's house. And Bob would always send his mom stuff in the mail, catalogues and—I don't remember him sending articles. I think they were in magazines and stuff. She had tons of stuff around the house. I was a lot of times by myself so I was always reading and looking at these articles. The amount of stuff going on there was—wow, look at what Bob is doing. It's the Venice Biennale, it was the—this, that, this, just all these things. It was tons of stuff around the house all the time. Plus Bob would send a piece of art once in a while. So I felt like I was getting a sense of what he was up to from just hanging out at my grandmother's house. I don't really

remember her talking about it so much. She'd talk, I would hear her on the phone with him sometimes when I was smaller, but I don't remember anything specific about that.

Q: When you started talking to him on the phone yourself would you ask him about all these different adventures that you were seeing that he was on?

Begneaud: Sometimes. I'd get on the phone and go, "Hi, how are you?" And he would say, "Oh I'm in so-and so. I'm doing this and I'm having—" or, "Last night I had dinner—" with this person and that. It was kind of chitchat stuff really, but he was filling me in on what he was up to. It was always, "Wow that's—really? You're doing that?" It was stuff that I never could really imagine myself doing. It was kind of surreal in that way, four corners of the planet.

Q: What else would you guys talk about on the phone?

Begneaud: I don't know, he would wonder what I was up to. Of course in those days it was high school and I was playing basketball and doing regular stuff. But there was nothing super interesting happening in Lafayette. As it turns out I guess I could have paid attention more. But hunting with my folks, with my dad. And that was something that was really terribly uninteresting to Bob. And I was always really good at sports and Bob wasn't a big sports guy either. So we kind of came from way different—didn't come from, because he grew up that way.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: But at that point we were in very different worlds.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: But we just talked sometimes. He'd just call for—just to—

Q: Just to chat.

Begneaud: —shoot the breeze.

Q: Well, what kind of uncle was he like at that time in your life? Did he have advice for you?

Was he—

Begneaud: I can't really say it was advice. I had times in my life when I'd call Bob. I was having girlfriend troubles and stuff. We would talk about stuff for sure.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Bob wasn't much on giving advice. Bob was more observation. I remember once walking, I guess it was after dinner, somewhere in New York. I don't remember how old I was. Twenty or something. We were just walking around and we were just having a conversation about observing things. What are you paying attention to? The shadows? Are you looking at the fence or are you looking at the shadows from the fence? Are you looking at the trees or the

shadow of the branches? I felt like I was getting lessons in observation and how to look at things and how to think about things very differently than where I was in Lafayette, hanging out, doing my normal life. I got that from him, that type of—I don't know what to call it—I guess I called them lessons, but they didn't really seem like that. It really changed my whole way of looking at life, hanging out with Bob.

Q: How?

Begneaud: Just how I thought about things and how I came to understand other possibilities, other possible ways to think about a situation or people. I did a lot more listening than I did talking with Bob because Bob liked to talk. He was a good talker and he could talk about a lot of things and when we'd be sitting around he was the—he didn't dominate, but when Bob was talking, everybody was listening. Each time, sitting at a dinner table, having cocktails with him, with maybe a group of people at the—it was like mini-sermons in a way.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I really wish I remembered a lot more than I do. Or wish I'd taken notes or something. Not sitting there taking notes—

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: —but before you go to bed, oh remember— I did a little bit of that. I have a few journals. Bob would say something that was just unbelievable. Either hysterical or witty or something you never thought about before. I laughed more with Bob than I've laughed with anybody in my life. [Laughs] He was just that kind of guy—

Q: So you don't remember the specifics of the sermons, but—

Begneaud: I don't, no.

Q: —are there themes when you think about what he liked to talk about or—

Begneaud: Not really. They were so random. Really, that was the amazing thing. It was different all the time. It could be something that was happening on TV and then it would be a riff going off of that. I remember one time my friend Chuck and I went to Captiva. We were probably in our early twenties or something like that and we showed up in Captiva at two or three in the afternoon. We started having cocktails and it was just the three of us. Bob had a bar, which was the kitchen table. There were no stools and we stood around that for a while, a long while. And it was just one thing after another. I mean I really—my stomach was sore the next day. Chuck and I had the best time just standing there talking to Bob for hours having cocktails. We laughed so hard it was just—it was endless. And I don't remember all the specifics of it.

But I remember once, that same afternoon, we were sitting there and there was a fly flying around the kitchen table. Everything was white, the whole house was white, the whole kitchen

was white. Every once in a while you'd kind of snap at the fly to try to get rid of it—it would land on your drink or—it was just bugging us and it was there for hours. I must have grabbed for that fly a dozen times. Chuck probably did the same thing. And at one point we're just sitting there and Bob looks over and he takes a sip of his drink and sets it down and he just reaches over and he goes—he picks up the fly real slowly—

[Laughter]

Begneaud: —and he walks over to the screen door opens it up and lets it out to the beach and closes the door and comes over just like nothing ever happened.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: And Chuck and I were looking at each other going, “How did he do that?”

[Laughter]

Begneaud: There was something supernatural about that.

So, he was one of those characters. My friends talk about growing up with Neal Cassady and what a character he was and how he could be sitting there with five people at the table, having five separate conversations at the same time, just complete conversations all going on. That was sort of what Bob would do. He would sit there and someone sitting here would make a comment

to Bob, but Bob would already be talking to this person and two minutes later he would answer this person in a totally coherent fashion and completely had thought about what this person was talking about. He would have these complete conversations with everybody at the table. Not just little, nod your head, I heard what you're saying. But the whole idea about what was going on with each person. It was completely mind-blowing.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Did you cross paths with [Christopher] Chris [Rauschenberg] at all?

Begneaud: Yes. Chris was—I think he's either five or seven years older than me. When we were smaller, we did a little bit. But we never really hung out. The time we would hang out was oh a time or two in New York, mostly when Bob would have an opening. Chris would come to town and we would get to hang out a little bit. But we didn't really grow up together. We were in different places and he was a little older than me. We always got along just fine. We just never got to hang out that much together.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: In Captiva sometimes and New York sometimes or some other place where Bob was having an opening.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: When was the first time you traveled with Bob?

Begneaud: You mean like he and I just went off together? Or me going to meet him someplace for an opening, like with my mom and my grandmother?

Q: Well, both. Maybe start with when you were a kid.

Begneaud: Other than coming to the house when we were young—I was little then and don't remember that much. I don't know specifically. I know—coming to some openings in New York when I was younger. And Los Angeles sometimes. But I remember the first trip Bob and I took together—Bob was like, “I haven't taken a vacation in— I forgot how many years.” I flew to Captiva and we were supposed to go roller-skating with Dustin Hoffman in Los Angeles or something like that. So that was our plan. We were going to go to Los Angeles and hang out for a while. And then Ileana Sonnabend called. She was in Venice, Italy. Bob talked to her for a while, then I talked to her for a little while, and we hung up and Bob goes, “Let's go have lunch with Ileana.” “Okay.” “Call Ileana back, tell her we're coming to have lunch with her, day after tomorrow.” So I'm like, “Okay.” So, “Bob wants to come have lunch with you.” So, “Okay.”

Then we came to New York for a night and then Bob got us on the Concorde and we took the Concorde to Paris, spent the night there. Then we went to Venice. That was the trip—we hung out and just traveled and Bob photographed and we spent time with Ileana and Michael [Sonnabend] all over Venice. Then we went to see Brice [Marden] and Helen Marden [née Harrington] in Greece and took a car trip all around. Brice's daughters were little then. They were blonde-haired little girls and we ended up hanging out, drinking peach margaritas with Leonard Cohen somewhere in Greece.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: It was just an amazing few weeks. We stayed at the [Belmond Hotel] Cipriani in Italy and I'll never forget, we walked in there and obviously Bob had been there before. We walked in and they said, "Ah, it's the maestro!" It was very cool to see Bob—to be his little sidekick in this whole adventure. I think that the Venice Biennale was happening that year and that was the first time I met [James] Jim Rosenquist. After dinner we were walking down some little alleyway and there's this person who had leaned on the wall and grabbed these posters and then rolled himself up into this little tube. We walked by and Bob goes, "Hi Jim!" He goes, "Oh, hi Bob!" [Laughs] "What are you doing here?" Everybody'd had several cocktails by this point I suppose. Then walking into restaurants in Venice, you could see people like, "It's Rauschenberg!" "Rauschenberg." I guess you were asking at what point I started seeing this. It was different periods of time that I could see what a big deal Bob was in the art world.

Q: What year was this trip?

Begneaud: That must have been '75 or -6, one of those years. Something like that. Yes, that was the first time we ever went on a vacation and played around and just did stuff. Going to museums and people would have Bob over, art collectors, and I'd be sitting there like, "Okay Bob, if you could take anything home in this house, what would you take?" And he'd go, "Okay."

[Laughter]

Begneaud: And he'd look around and he'd point and I'd go, "That's what you would take out of all this incredible art in this house?" It'd be like a little statue of a penis. "Well okay that's not what I would take, but okay." We'd play this little game. So it was really fun to just hang out with Bob.

Q: And did it feel like a vacation? Did he—or was he—

Begneaud: No, he wasn't working. So he was—

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Normally he's there for a purpose, getting ready for a show or doing something for ROCI or whatever. But we just hung out. We just hung out and there are a hundred stories that I could tell just from that little vacation. It was really fun.

Q: Well, tell me one then.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Let's see, what would one be? Well, one, we were with Brice and Helen and they'd rented a big black Mercedes and a driver to drive us around. We were just driving through the countryside in Greece and we stopped to swim on this little beach and there was a little restaurant there. The guy goes, "Oh, we're cooking you guys dinner." So we all swim and hang out and then we go in and this guy brings out this great big roasted fish. And it's delicious. And then we're hanging out and drinking—I don't think we were drinking retsina, so we were drinking some kind of wine. Anyway the owner comes out—we're done, everybody's stuffed. The owner is bullshitting with Bob and he pops out the eyeball, this big eyeball, and wants to give it to Bob. Bob's like—oh, I could see it in his eyes. He's like, "Oh." It wasn't a little eyeball. It was like a fifty-cent piece, the eyeball. It was the treasured part for this guy. Bob of course, he's going to accept it. He puts it in his mouth and I could see him just go—like swallowing something. I could see where this was going. He was going to go for the other eyeball. At this point I'm like, "I'm out of here." So I watch Bob as I'm walking away really struggling to swallow this—it's hard to chew an eyeball. I don't know if you've ever eaten an eyeball or not—a fish eyeball.

At some point on that trip, we're sitting there drinking peach margaritas with Leonard Cohen and the sun was coming up. I wish I could've recorded that conversation between those guys. It was

for hours. At some point I'm like, "I'm out, I got to go home." I don't even know what time those guys got done with that evening. Yes, that was an interesting trip, for sure.

Actually one of the highlights of that trip was at the Cipriani Hotel, which you had to take a boat to. It wasn't in the main part of Venice. You had to take a boat to it. It was across on some other little island. We came home one evening and it had three different level balconies. We were sitting up there and there was an incredible thunderstorm that moved over Venice and crackling lightning. I've never seen anything like that. We were out on this balcony watching this lightning storm move over Venice. When lightning would crack it would light up the whole city and then go dark again. You could see grey clouds and then it would move again and the lightning would be in a different place. It was like theater. It was just amazing. And to sit there and watch it with Bob and hear his comments about it—that was really one of the highlights of the trip, just watching that thunderstorm with him up on that balcony.

Q: What are some other trips that you took together?

Begneaud: Well I did a few of the ROCI trips with him. There were several to Los Angeles I did because Bob was always doing something there, working with [Sidney B.] Sid [Felsen] at Gemini [G.E.L., Los Angeles].

Q: Which of the ROCI trips?

Begneaud: China.

Q: What do you remember about China?

Begneaud: I remember China being really, really cold and us having to paint the museum when we got there. There were lights out and we had to get these makeshift old brooms and paint the walls and kind of fix—it was pretty run-down and freezing cold in that place. I remember [Charles] Charlie Yoder was there. You know Charlie Yoder?

Q: I've heard about him, but I haven't met him.

Begneaud: Charlie's 6'8" or 6'9".

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: The Chinese were like, holy cow, look at this guy! I remember Terry [Van Brunt] brought a mountain bike built for two and riding that thing all over the place. The folks there were just tripping, how big Charlie was. They'd never seen anything like that in their lives.

Then we did Santiago, Chile. There was always something to do with the museums when you got there, to help get them together. I remember I'd be helping hang something and Bob would come in and he'd say, "Hey Rick! I need you to help me do something." He goes, "I'll meet you at the office in ten minutes." I go, "Oh, okay, I'll see you at the office in ten minutes." Everybody'd kind of look around and—alright so ten minutes, "I got to go, I've got to go meet Bob." There'd

be a little bar down the street. [Laughs] I'd meet him and we'd have cocktails. I don't know if we were supposed to be doing that or not. We probably should have been working, hanging the show. I always felt like I was getting glared at by the people who were actually doing way more work than me and I'm sitting there having a pisco sour with Bob down the street.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Chit-chatting about stuff.

Q: Would he talk about how he thought things were going on ROCI when you joined him for some of those trips?

Begneaud: Sometimes. Sometimes. I remember that one in Chile was a very hot political—he went to a talk with a lot of—I don't know if they were students exactly, but the younger crowd—the place was packed. It got a little hostile there. You could hear bombs going off down the road with [Augusto] Pinochet's thing happening. I didn't totally understand what was going on at the time. But it was pretty wild what was happening and people were freaked out living there. Of course Bob was a peacemaker. He was there like, “Look, I'm here to help generate conversation and peace, I'm not taking sides. I'm just here to open some communication up.”

Q: And people wanted him to take a position?

Begneaud: Not really. I couldn't understand all of it, but there were some hot topics going on. I don't remember specifically what they were. They were really trying to put Bob on the spot for stuff. You didn't always see Bob get upset, but you could tell he was a little tense that day and really trying to defend himself, "If I'm taking a side, I would be taking your side. I'm not." He had to really be careful what he was saying because we were in a foreign land, a hostile foreign land so to speak. [Laughs] And you don't want to get on anybody's bad side.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: And you know how Bob can talk between the lines a little bit. Did you ever meet Bob?

Q: No.

Begneaud: Oh. He could talk between the lines sometimes and say things clearly but abstractly and kind of left it up to you to figure out what he was really trying to say without having to say it outright.

Q: Sure, yes.

Begneaud: [Laughs] He was very good at that.

Q: Are there any instances where you remember observing him in a bind?

Begneaud: I can't think of any offhand. What pops to mind is a time we were in Venice. I told Bob I was going to go out and photograph. He goes, "Oh, see you later." So I'm off wandering around and I remember coming up to a street musician. There were twenty people, I don't know, thirty people around. The cops came up and started to harass the guy because I guess he didn't have a permit or something. I look over and I see Bob over there. Well, he didn't see me. The cops take the guy, they take his money, they take all his stuff. They shoo him on his way. Bob reaches in his pocket and grabs all of his money and goes over as the guy's walking away and just puts it in his hand and then just turns and walks away. Doesn't even say anything to the guy. Bob always had a lot of cash and lord knows how much money he gave the street guy. Probably a thousand dollars.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I don't know what it was. He didn't see me. He wasn't doing it to impress anybody. It was just, here you go. I thought that was a cool thing.

Q: Yes. People talk a lot about his generosity. Did you ever think about what motivated that quality in him? Where that came from?

Begneaud: I don't think I ever thought about where it came from. If I had to guess, I think—Bob grew up pretty poor and I think he appreciated the fact that a lot of people are without. I think when Bob started making a little money—I don't know because I didn't really hang out with

him, but I'm assuming even before he even had money, he was very generous. Even just with me, he was always very generous. I can see it with other people, with other artists even, who were struggling, just from observing and hearing what was going on, things he did to help other artists out. Maybe there are other people who have done that on the scale he did, but I don't know about it. I'm not saying it didn't happen, I'm just saying I witnessed Bob do it time and time and time again.

Q: Do what?

Begneaud: Be very generous with other artists and other people in general. I can't speak for the early days, but I know when I was around he would probably rather spend time talking to the elevator guy than the head of the museum. He was always doing something to help somebody else.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Whether it was money or whatever, I don't even know.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: So yes.

[INTERRUPTION]

Begnaud: God, just walking on the third floor [note: of 381 Lafayette Street]—all the craziness that's happened on that floor—

Q: Anything in particular?

Begnaud: Oh my god, well I don't think you have enough hard drive space.

[Laughter]

Q: Well give me a short version. What were the first things that came to mind, walking on the third floor?

Begnaud: One of the things I remember happening, I just flashed on, because it looks so different there. I was looking at the walls and stuff. The Grateful Dead were playing in town for six nights and then they had an off night. So we had a party for the Grateful Dead here. We had the whole band here and Bob wasn't supposed to be in town. So suddenly Bob's going to be in town and I've already got this party for the Grateful Dead coming to town. Bob had some AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] benefit or something to go to. So here Bob comes in. Everybody in the band is here.

Q: When is this?

Begneaud: This must have been '88 or '89, I can't remember exactly. I have a ton of friends and the full on band's here and Bob comes in, probably, I don't know what time it was, ten-thirty, eleven o'clock, and each group has been cocktailing all night long. Bob was in pretty good shape when he got here. He walks in and says hello. He was very friendly to everybody. But this is his house, so he walked into this party, he didn't really know a lot of people. Somebody had given him a copy of John Cage's—what is it? Two Minutes and 33 Seconds?

Q: It's "Four Minutes and 22"— [Note: 4'33", 1952]

Begneaud: Whatever it is.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Yes, yes, whatever. So Bob walks into the kitchen and this was VCR [videocassette recorder] days. I remember Phil Lesh was interested. Phil comes in and a couple other people come in—and Bob puts it on. Of course it's a pretty silent thing and there was a kind of ruckus going on in there. So Bob finally gets up and he goes, "Close the fucking door!" Bob said it loudly enough where it got everybody's attention. People in there didn't know what Bob was doing obviously. So we sat in the kitchen—we didn't sit, we stood in the kitchen to watch the tape for whatever it was, four and a half minutes. But that kind of got everybody's attention in a hurry. After that it went back to normal again. But I always thought about that; it was really an interesting evening because I was on my toes a little bit, on pins and needles a little bit because it

was kind of my doing to have the party here. Then Bob came into town at the last minute, which put me ill at ease a little bit.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Anyway.

Q: So, you had been in Captiva for summers. And then were you in Captiva full-time for a while?

Begneaud: No, but I would go from time to time. I didn't always just go in the summer. I'd go in the winter sometimes—

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: —when I had a few days, I'd pop down. But pretty much every summer.

Q: Okay. And then when did you start cooking for the Dead?

Begneaud: I cooked for the Dead when I was in California. I moved to California in '85, so it must have been starting in '86, for several years.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: That was mostly up at their rehearsal studio on Front Street [San Rafael, California]. Then I became good friends with [Robert Hall] Bobby Weir and I would cook with him a lot at his house. I cooked at a lot of functions, Rainforest Action Network benefits and Joseph [John] Campbell and various other things. But those all happened mostly at Weir's house.

Q: Okay so I'm just trying to put it all together in a trajectory. So when was it that you were living here? You stayed here when Hisachika went to France, right?

Begneaud: Yeah, well, let's see, Dylan [Rauschenberg Begneaud] was born in '89. Bob called one afternoon and said that Sachika was going to Paris and did we want to come watch the house for a year? I said, "Well, let me talk to Shannon [O'Leary Begneaud Joy]." Because Dylan was young. I don't remember specifically, but he was under a year old. I said, "Well, let me talk to Shannon, I'll call you back, Bob." I hung the phone up and I thought this wasn't going to go well. I was going to have to maybe try and talk Shannon into this. I go, "Shannon, Bob called and wants to know if we want to go watch the house in New York for a year." She goes, "Yes."

[Laughter]

Begneaud: It was still resonating out of my mouth and she's like, "Yes." I'm like, "Really?" She said, "Yes, absolutely." So I called Bob back. "Yes, we'll come for a year." We ended up staying for two years and having another baby, we ended up having Logan [Begneaud] out here. That was interesting, actually living here.

Q: Well, tell me about that.

Begneaud: I drove out with my buddy with some stuff and Sachika was still here. He hadn't left yet. Sachika showed me what to do, how to do everything. Because this was Sachika's baby for so many years. My friend was here for a couple days and then Shannon was coming with Dylan, maybe a week later or something like that. So I was here by myself. It was summertime so there weren't a lot of people in town. I was in this big-ass house by myself coming from California, from the little place we lived in to this—this place is big. It's five floors up here and three down below. They had just installed a new security system in this thing, which was going on the blink every once in a while. In the middle of the night, it would just start going off. Like, shit! Someone's breaking in! I didn't know what to do and it happened a lot. They were still getting the tweaks worked out of it. Shannon, when we got together, had Carmen, this big Malamute timber wolf. So Carmen and I would go—when the alarm would go off, you'd have to go back—trying to figure how to turn it off. That thing was so fricking loud. Then I go—does that mean someone's in the house because it's gone off now? Or what? I don't know why, but I had a shotgun. I'd brought a shotgun that was with my stuff.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: So we would get the shotgun and Carmen and I would start walking all over the house—

Q: Wow.

Begneaud: —see what was going on.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I did this three or four times. And I was like, oh this can't do this. It was freaking me out man. Of course it was never anything. Then I'm thinking, oh maybe it's in the chapel or maybe it's—lord knows what's going on.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Then Shannon got here with Dylan and it was still going on. But then at least during the day there were people here.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: Kind of like it is now. At night no one was here except us. But that was cool because we were here and we would get an invitation to everything in town. Bob got an invitation to every little art opening, everything. It would be like a stack where, okay, tonight there are ten things we can go and do.

Bob would come maybe once a month, sometimes twice a month. My gig was putting flowers in and making sure everything was clean and sheets and everything and getting lots of food. Bob would say, “Oh the Queen of Norway’s coming tomorrow so go get some stuff.” It was really interesting living here because it was very different than anything I was used to on a regular basis. I got to do a lot of things with Bob when I would come, before I was living here. But then when I was living here I got to do everything. That was a trip because we lived on this floor.

Q: Oh yes? So on the fifth floor.

Begneaud: We lived on the fifth floor and this was before the elevator.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: So groceries, kids, everything was schlepped up those zillions of stairs, coming up here. “Oh, we forgot that? Oh, right, okay.”

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Yes, it was a trip. Lots of things happened. There was a little closet, right over here. We put Logan’s baby bed in it. We kept coming in and she’d be full of soot. What is going on? Come to find out there was some old fireplace or something and wind was blowing all this soot on all of her baby clothes. Okay this is not good. We had to get that taken care of. And at the time the only air conditioner in the whole building was in the archive room, little closet, which

was down below on the fourth floor. Well, you live in New York. You know what it's like in the summertime. It's hot and humid and the kids and I were coming from Northern California where it's 55 year-round. I thought, man, I got to get an air conditioner at least up here to sleep. We finally put one down in the kitchen. Bob hated the air conditioners. Hated them.

Q: Why?

Begneaud: I couldn't understand why. I don't know, coming from Captiva is one thing. The day we left, Bob took all the air conditioners out. He didn't want the air conditioners. They freaked him out. Of course, the older he got when you'd go to Captiva it'd be like you could hang meat in his place down there.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: He liked the air conditioner finally. But when we were here, for some reason he did not like the air conditioners. Interesting. But yes that was an interesting time living here for a couple years.

Q: What were some of the things that were going on during that period?

Begneaud: There were so many things; I don't remember a lot of specifics. But it was mostly meetings he was having. I remember he was getting his big trust thing set up. It was always attorneys and things going on and interviews. I remember David Byrne interviewing him one

long afternoon. [Note: Published as “Eco-Art” in *Self*, June 1992.] It was interesting because I would pop in. I didn’t want to just sit there, but I was always doing something and moving about—not in the shadows, but just moving around, doing stuff, trying to just keep myself busy. Popping in from time to time. I didn’t sit in on those trust meetings because that was not my place to be doing that.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: But yes, it was interesting. It was kind of overwhelming in a way.

Q: How?

Begneaud: I don’t know how Bob did it. There was always something on his schedule. At three o’clock these guys are coming and so-and-so is dropping by to get this thing at six and then we have this dinner at nine. There was always stuff going on. A stack of papers. And he didn’t always want to deal with it. So somebody—it wasn’t ever me—had to say, “We got to get through those papers.” Bob would be having a cocktail and he would get fed up sometimes when he would be asked, okay now what about the thing with so-and-so? “I don’t want to deal with that right now!” Okay. But then when is a good time to deal with that? You’ve got to get it dealt with. That was mostly Darryl [R. Pottorf] or somebody who had to take the hit.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: “Okay, you’ve got to dive in. You’ve got to get this stuff taken care of.” Bob knew that, but he would get just overwhelmed himself I think occasionally. Then he started getting where I would get the brunt of a few things occasionally, which was interesting because he never ever was like that with me.

Q: What would you get the brunt end of?

Begneaud: It was little stuff. One night he came and there was a big thing of roses on the ground and all the petals had fallen off. My gig was to keep flowers in the house. So either that night or probably the next morning, I went and got fresh roses. He couldn’t believe I’d cleaned that up. He goes, “Didn’t you notice how beautiful all those petals were on the ground?” I go, “I did notice, but I thought it was my job to put fresh flowers in the house.”

Q: Right.

Begneaud: It was little stuff. But he would snap on me once in a while for stuff. I’m like, “Really? I’m just trying to make it all work here.” But he was really just a sweet guy at heart pretty much all the time.

Q: Who was he with at that time in his life?

Begneaud: Well, when I was here, it was Darryl.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: Yes. Terry had been out for a while because they had that little falling out about who owned the tapes and it got messy. I stayed out of all of that. Of course there was conversation happening around—but when I first started hanging out with Bob, it was Bob Petersen.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Have you met Bob Petersen?

Q: Yes.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Bob Petersen had long blonde hair, a big long blonde beard, and he was just a super mellow guy.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: When I would go to Captiva it was awesome for me because Bob Petersen would just totally take care of me. He would always go fishing with me or we'd play basketball or we would go hang out. It was almost like it was one of his jobs to take care of me. I didn't need taking care of, but he was always just there to—

Q: Nice company.

Begneaud: It was great. We'd go to the store together and driving the VW [Volkswagen] bus and—

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Yes, he was awesome.

Q: What were they like together?

Begneaud: They were good. They were really good together. Bob Petersen lived by the old print shop and he had a little art studio there. He was always working. He made those great little monthly paintings. Have you ever seen those things?

Q: I've heard about them.

Begneaud: They're like diaries.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: They're really cool. They would be little stamps or little feathers and, "Went fishing with Ricky today," and, "Great thunderstorm from the east," or whatever. All these little tidbits of information, but they ended up being these really beautiful little pieces. Yes.

Q: Okay and then Darryl here. What'd you think of Darryl?

Begneaud: Darryl and I also got along really well. I did spend a lot of time down there. Of course Darryl in the early part was always working with Bob as his assistant. There was a time where it was Terry and Darryl and a few other people working. Bob always had a pretty good crew going. Darryl to me always seemed very shy and laid back. He wasn't in the middle of a big conversation. He was just laid back. There was enough other stuff, enough conversation going—not that he didn't talk. I'm just saying that early on he seemed like he was a little bit shy. I think that changed over the years a little bit. He felt more comfortable. But Darryl was always busy doing something.

Q: Did you see any commonalities in the kinds of people Bob chose to bring into his life, either as studio assistants or partners?

Begneaud: Nothing that I really noticed about that. Not really. I liked everybody who was around.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: I think he always brought in people he liked and wanted to spend some time with—

Q: Right.

Begneaud: I guess like anybody, you wouldn't want to hire somebody who's a jerk or something. You don't want to spend time with those folks.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: I think if you ever got crossways with Bob, did something that he really didn't like, your direction was the door eventually.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Bob was always so generous with everybody and I remember hearing stories—in Captiva people would go and just write their own paychecks. Bob was just very trusting. I think he got burned a couple times. And of course that was the end of that. But yes.

Q: Were there qualities that you think he was particularly intolerant of?

Begneaud: I'm sure there were. You had to be a trustworthy person and someone with an open mind. Yes, if he thought you were going to try and do something that was not on the level, he did

not like that at all. I sat around so many times and the conversation came up where so-and-so did something that was not cool. He never forgot that stuff either.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: In the art world—he never forgot that stuff. Not that he would never work with you again, but he would never—depending on what it was, he would remember that stuff.

Q: Okay, so Sachika comes back to New York? Or what ends your time staying here?

Begneaud: We were supposed to stay a year and we said, okay we're going—we've got to go. Because we had two little kids. I know that everybody raises kids in New York, but for us, we didn't have a car so we couldn't get out of town really. Our nature was going to the park and walking the sidewalks and stuff. At the time, every couple months it'd be, oh some old lady ran her Cadillac up into the park and hit a dog or hit somebody or whatever. [Laughs] We spent some time here and I thought, you know what? We need to go. I grew up in south Louisiana where there's nothing but flat land. And then in Northern California I had redwood trees in my front yard and hiking trails right there. It was nature. I think I really missed that for the kids. Finally we just decided—we're going. Then Sachika came back and things were interesting.

Q: What do you mean?

Begneaud: I don't know—

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I think Bob and those guys—had maybe run the course with Hisachika.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: I don't want to get into all of that, but I think it was becoming a little more work for Bob and crew.

Q: Ah, okay.

[Laughter]

Q: Got it.

Begneaud: Have you talked to Sachika?

Q: Yes, yes, he's doing well now.

Begneaud: You did the interview?

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Okay.

Q: Okay, so I'm wondering if maybe this is a good place to pause because I feel like we're about halfway through stuff I want to talk to you about. We can pick up tomorrow. Yes, I think that would make sense.

Begneaud: Okay.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #2

Interviewee: Rick Begneaud

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: May 29, 2015

Q: Today is May 29, 2015. This is Sara Sinclair with Rick Begneaud and again we are at 381 Lafayette Street in New York City. So before we continue moving our way through the trajectory, is there anything that you'd like to add to what we talked about yesterday? Did any kind of early childhood or early memories of Captiva or New York or your travels with Bob pop into your head after leaving yesterday?

Begneaud: Not necessarily. There's all little stuff, but nothing really big sticks out for me that I didn't—I'm sure on the weekend, I'll think, oh, I should have talked about that. But so far, not really, not right now.

Q: All right. So you were telling me about the night that you hosted a party for the Grateful Dead here and that Bob came home from a function and that you all ended up watching this tape of John Cage's *4'33"*. Were there other times when Bob ended up crossing paths with the Dead community?

Begneaud: Yes. Bob and Bobby Weir became friends.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: We had a couple nights where Weir would come over—one in particular. It was the four of us at the kitchen table, third floor; it was Bob and Darryl and Bobby Weir and myself. We stayed up a big portion of the night just talking. That was a really cool thing because for me it was two worlds going on. Bob's world and then the Grateful Dead world, which for me I'd never really thought about the fact that although those two worlds were very influential for me, to have them combined was a big thing. I introduced those guys and they really just hit it off, telling stories. It was late in the evening and Weir was telling the story about this dream he had. I don't remember all the specifics of it, but at the end of the dream everybody at the table was crying.

[Laughter]

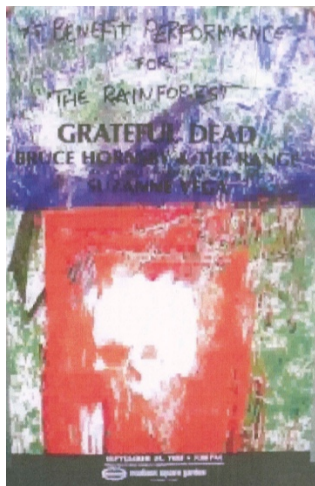
Begneaud: It was this really long dream. It was something about Shiva. It was really a great evening.

Anyway, those guys crossed paths a few times and then Weir ended up seeing one of the *Borealis* pieces [1988–92] that he loved [*Calico (Borealis)*, 1990]. I think it might have been the first *Borealis* piece. He goes, "I wanted to buy that." So I asked Bob and Bob was like, "No, don't want to sell that one." Then Weir really wanted it so I came back to Bob and talked to him about it. He goes, "Well let me think about it," as he usually did. He ended up selling the piece to Weir. So Weir has this really beautiful big *Borealis* in his house.



Robert Rauschenberg
Calico (Borealis), 1990
Acrylic and tarnishes on brass
36 3/4 x 97 inches (93.3 x 246.4 cm)
Private collection

Then we hooked those guys up and they did the Rainforest Action Network. Bob did the poster for that, one of the functions, and a whole lithograph series and stuff. So then Bob called one day and he was like, “Yes, I went to the Grateful Dead show the other night.” I was like, “What? You went to what? You saw them on TV?” He said, “No, no, I went to the show.” It was somewhere in Florida. He took an airplane and flew over. I thought, okay.



Robert Rauschenberg
A Benefit Performance for the
Rainforest poster, 1988
Offset lithograph
28 x 18 inches (71.1 x 45.7 cm)

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Not that he needed permission, but I would have thought that I would have known about this. I thought it was interesting that Bob just hopped on a plane and went to the Dead show.

Q: Did he say what he thought of it?

Begneaud: No, he loved it. He said he had a great time. He hung out on stage. He didn't hang out in the audience. I remember later in New Orleans at a show he was at, one of the roadies, Steve Parish was just raving about what a great guy Bob was. You know how Bob is, he was probably holding court backstage or onstage rather. Bobby and Bob became friends. As a matter of fact my mom had her seventieth birthday and it was their fifty-year anniversary and it was also almost Bob's birthday. They had a big function in Lafayette and they hired some local band. My mom wanted me to invite Bobby. I said, "Well, I'll ask him." Weir was like, "Yes, sure." So he brought a guitar, came down, and my mom's favorite song is "Sugar Magnolia" [1970]. They played three or four songs. And then all these local musicians came and everybody had this big jam thing happening for a couple of hours. It was really cool.

Q: What were the points of intersection for Bob and Bobby?

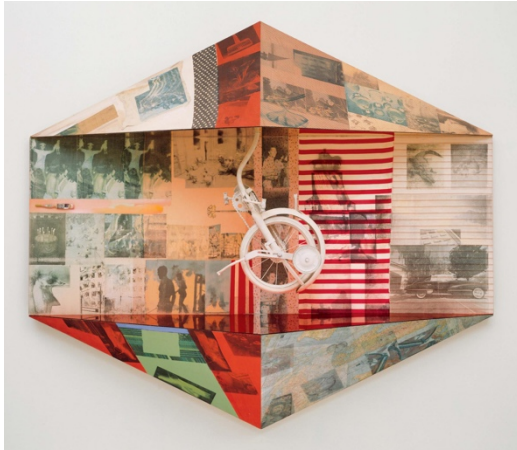
Begneaud: Between them personally?

Q: Yes. Why do you think they got along?

Begneaud: I don't know. I think they're both artists. I think in some way, neither one is religious, but both were spiritual. They just got along really well. I couldn't say specifics really about that.

Q: You said they represented two worlds for you. How were those worlds different?

Begneaud: Both being artists, but—I grew up with Bob. Just walking in here downstairs today those big—I forget what they call those pieces, *Scales* [1977–81] or whatever those pieces were, back from the early eighties or something. I love those pieces and they represent a time for me; the first time I saw those pieces, I was like, wow. They blew me away, color-wise and just the way they feel hanging on the wall. Then for the Grateful Dead it was always an enlightening thing also, musically and what they represented. The Grateful Dead also turned me on to different styles of music, stuff that I knew about but I didn't really pay much attention to. It kind of brought that whole Americana music thing together as Bob did, represented from his side, the artwork, the American icons and symbols and just all kinds of things. Those worlds in my head used to not feel like they went together. But then suddenly they really became one in my crazy head. It was very cool when those guys got together. And now in my work, when I paint, those two guys—I don't know what the word I'm looking for is, but those things have influenced my work and my painting and the way I look at stuff. Yes, it was pretty cool.



Robert Rauschenberg
Miter I (Scale), 1980
Solvent transfer, fabric and paper collage,
acrylic, and mirrored panels with paintbrush
and painted bicycle part on wood support
86 x 96 x 26 inches (218.4 x 243.8 x 66 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: How have they each influenced the way you look at things?

Begneaud: To say it simply, I think they both really opened my mind to seeing things differently and seeing things with a very open mind. The Dead did that musically and Bob did it visually. Both did it emotionally together. I didn't really go to art school, so I grew up with Bob, watching him and observing and seeing the things I really loved about his work and some of the things that weren't my favorite things. That in some ways carried over to my work, in my work that I like, with its color, space, or what's there, and what's not there. It's influenced me for sure.

Q: What are the things that you most love and what are the things that you love less?

Begneaud: About Bob's work?

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: I don't know that I could put my finger on it, but it all works together. I love this image and the way this sits and the color here and the fabric. And there may be some odd image that I don't necessarily like. It's just a super personal thing really, but it all works. That was the thing about Bob. Bob didn't get down to specifics about, well someone may not like that. He didn't give a hoot about whether someone didn't like that or someone's going to really like that. He just made his stuff. He just moved forward and I can respect that. I guess that's one other thing about Weir. I guess this is something too, I hadn't thought about this before. But Bob was always into just trying stuff. Bob Rauschenberg. Trying stuff whether it turned out great or not. A lot of times it did, but he was at least trying it. Weir was the same way. Weir would just try stuff. He'd come over and he was cooking and he'd say, "What are you doing? Let me do that." Stuff he didn't know how to do. He was always trying and he may do it well, he may fail, but he was at least trying it. I always respect that from both of those guys that they're out there doing it. They're not shying away, "Nah, I don't know if I could do that really," or, "That looks hard to do." They didn't care about any of those things. Growing up that was an issue for me. I didn't try a lot of stuff because I might fail at that, I might not do well. I might be embarrassed if I don't do this well.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Now that I'm thinking of it, that may be the biggest influence or the best influence that I've gotten from both of those guys.

Q: So it was during the nineties that you were catering for the Dead or you were—

Begneaud: Well I wouldn't call it catering, although I got offered that gig, to cater for the Dead. But that would have meant I would not have seen any music. That would have meant I would have been cooking backstage and traveling and stuff. I got offered that gig. They were like, "You can do this, but you know you're not going to see music." I was like, "Yes, I don't really want to do that."

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: So I would go to Front Street, which is where they rehearsed.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: I would go and set up a barbecue pit or bring stuff and then I was there. I could actually be part of hanging out and listen to them rehearse and be part of conversations and stuff. I catered parties at Weir's house for functions like Rainforest Action Network and just odd things.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: But I wouldn't really call it catering for the Dead necessarily. I did all the rehearsal stuff with Bob Dylan up there at Front Street, which was actually really cool.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Because they weren't letting anybody in for that. A lot of people would come and hang out and those people weren't getting in the door. But the guy with the food was getting in the door.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: So that was really cool.

Q: Yes. And were you back here at all during that period?

Begneaud: I left in the middle of doing all of that. I was doing all of that and then suddenly I left to come out to New York.

Q: So, tell me about your own evolution away from cooking to becoming an artist yourself.

Begneaud: I guess the evolution would begin really watching Bob do—actually I don't know that I ever watched Bob do—because he was probably doing that before I was able to watch him.

Putting the lighter fluid on a comic book and scratching it off with a spoon or a pen or something like that. I started doing that in high school probably. Just sort of imitating one or two or three of Bob's processes with collage, cutting out things, and paper, and then doing the ink transfer with lighter fluid and taping things onto pages and stuff. But I never really honored myself doing that.

I was always embarrassed to do it—for Bob to know I was doing it for some reason. I don't know why I was stuck with that crazy idea. But I made a lot of work in high school and college and me and my buddy, Jimmy Macdonell would paint all summer, we would just paint. We'd go in his dad's garage and we would make stuff. I still have some of those things. But I never really took it very seriously, just because I thought, wow. I was standing in a pretty big shadow of Bob's.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: And so I was making stuff. Then I would start buying a little canvas and doing things and I never felt really good about them, but once in a while I'd make something. I'd go, well that's pretty good. I remember once down in Captiva we walked down the street from Bob's house to Darryl's house. Darryl had built this really beautiful, gorgeous house. I don't know if you've ever seen that place down there, but it's really beautiful. Anyway so you walk in these big, giant doors and there are these big, really wide stairs going up to the main part of the house. On either side were these giant paintings. I thought, holy crap, look at these big paintings. I guess Bob gave these big paintings to Darryl. There were American flags on it and some icons, images that I related to Bob. So I'm like, damn, I was pretty jealous about that, Darryl's got these big pieces.

We get up the stairs and we're having a cocktail and talking and I kind of wander around looking at stuff and Darryl's got a bunch of his work hanging on the wall. I thought they were really beautiful. I walked back down there, let me go stir up my jealousy some more and look at these

big pieces that Bob gave to Darryl. I started looking at them and I go, hang on a second, these are not Bob's pieces. These are Darryl's pieces. I saw Darryl's signature on them. Bob loved the fact that Darryl was making pieces and I don't want to say he was promoting, but he was helping Darryl with connections and whatever, helping him along. I realized that for Bob that was flattery. Darryl wasn't trying to copy Bob. He was influenced by Bob and making his own stuff. Because Bob wouldn't have made one that looked like that.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: There were some aspects of it that looked like Bob. It was in that moment I flashed on the fact that that was possible to do. Being close to Bob—not knowing him, you wouldn't care, but being that close to Bob—that that would be a flattery to him. I took that in and then shortly after that Shannon and I traveled to West Africa. We were there for two months and we would go to these little villages and there'd be little old scraps of cloth laying on the ground, bleached in the sun. They were absolutely beautiful. I started picking up a few things and somewhere in there I just thought, I'm going to go home and get an art studio. I was painting in between the kids' rooms downstairs and it would make a mess and I'd clean it up. I was trying not to wake the kids up if they were sleeping. So it was an odd way to be. Painting way. So I said that I was going to come home and get a studio. That's what I did. I came back and found one in Sausalito [California], redesigned it, and that's where I am now. Then I started making my work, going, okay I'm cool with having an influence—because it is pretty much my biggest influence, growing up with Bob—and using like I said earlier the things that I like, the ideas I like about Bob's stuff. So that's how it came to be. That's the rough sketch of it.

Q: Was there a time where you told him, “Oh, I’m making more time for this these days,” or “I see myself as an artist now.”

Begneaud: Yes. I didn’t tell him for a little while. I was down in Captiva. It was just he and I sitting there. We’d been talking about stuff and we were having a cocktail and I said, “Bob, there’s something I never told you.” I go, “You know I have an art studio in Sausalito now. I’m painting full time now.” [Laughs] He didn’t even really look at me. He just reached over, looking straight ahead, and he grabbed his drink and he took a long swig and he set it down and he goes, “No, I didn’t know that.”

[Laughter]

Begneaud: What I realized is that all those years before I could have been having a—because we always had friendship conversations about just stuff. Some of it was art, some of it was life, whatever. But I feel like I missed out on artist-to-artist conversation. Like, how do you that specifically? Or how, when you’re doing this—questions I would love to have asked him. Things I didn’t even know to ask until I was really doing my art in full swing. And it wasn’t that long after—well we did get to have a few of those conversations, but not nearly in the way that I wished I could’ve.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Now I'm sitting around, I have a couple photographs of Bob hanging in my studio, and I look over sometimes like, damn, how did you do that?

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Show me how you did this. Things I would just love to—little stuff, little things—I'd love to know.

Q: What do you think your biggest takeaway is from him as far as his influence on your own work or process?

Begneaud: Bob always seemed to be enjoying himself while he was making his work. It didn't seem like it was a struggle to him. Not that he didn't work hard at it or anything. I meant just that I don't think he gave himself ulcers worrying about making this piece, which I do sometimes. I kind of always flash back to what Bob always said, "Have fun when you're making your work." I think that's one thing. But the other thing is I think Bob was always just incredibly curious about what the possibilities were, where you could take something. For me that's true. When I start a piece I have no idea where it's going. It's just blank. And then I just start. I think the cool thing for me is the surprise of where it ends up going because it was not planned. It's unexpected and there are twists and turns along the way. When you get in that flow it's really a beautiful thing. It's hard to get in the flow for me. But I feel like Bob just trooped ahead. Even when it was difficult he just kept moving. That for me is a big—I don't know if that's an influence, but that's something I think about, that he just made stuff and he wasn't worried whether someone liked it

or not. He was just making it for himself really. I mean everybody too. But I don't think he was making it specifically to be judged by somebody else in that moment.

Q: Right. Did the way that you looked at his work change after you started making work yourself?

Begneaud: It did because I looked at it from more of a technical, process aspect. Vision—viewpoint. So before I would go, well that's really beautiful, that's really wonderful, never thinking about the details of how you did it. How do you do that? Walking in and now seeing those pieces I hadn't seen in twenty, twenty-five years—

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: —so on the way out today I'm probably going to go on the first floor and spend a little time—

Q: Looking.

Begneaud: —looking.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I know how he did some of the stuff now because I've had to totally teach myself how to do this stuff. I spent a little time with Darryl after Bob died, in his studio and he showed me a few things, which was great. But from then on, after—there's nobody else doing anything like it and so I had to teach myself along the way.

Q: Is there something in particular that you're most impressed by, process-wise or technique-wise?

Begneaud: I can't say there's one thing really. The amount of ideas that he's poured into his work is just—it's like looking at the universe. It's impossible to pinpoint. His work is so vast and different techniques and—it almost makes me speechless to think about it.

Q: People say Bob didn't talk about his own work very much. Were there ever any exceptions to that?

Begneaud: Nothing that I can think of because he really didn't.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: He didn't like to talk about other people's work either. He would tell you if he liked it or not.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: And he was usually pretty polite about it. When someone would say, “Hey look at what I did,” he was pretty polite about it. But he would never get into analyzing it or giving you a tip or if you did this or if you did that—he would never do that.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: He was always pretty cautious about that I think. I’m not saying he never did it, but around me I know he never did it.

Q: Did you have the opportunity to attend openings with him of his own work?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Did he engage with his work in that environment? Did you ever see him do the walkthroughs before or—

Begneaud: No.

Q: No.

Begneaud: The only time I saw him do that was in an interview. He did something at the—was it the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum [New York] for the retrospective—way back when [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective, 1997–98*]. But that was on film.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: “Can you walk us through?” I think it was kind of cool for him because he hadn’t seen a lot of that stuff in a long time. But no, I never really saw him engage with the work. Now he would go the day before to make sure things were hung in the right place and stuff. He would cruise through by himself typically. If there was something he’d go, “Can we lower this or change the light,” or something. But I never saw him do that, walk through and engage with someone else about the work. Now he was probably engaged himself with it for sure.

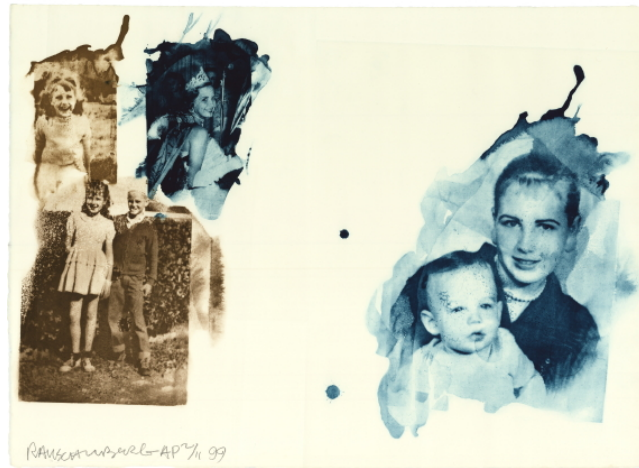
Q: Right.

Begneaud: But it’s his thing. It’s his stuff. [Laughs] Yes.

Q: Okay, so I want to talk about family and how that is seen in some of the work. There’s a photo of your mom as the Yambilee Queen that shows up over and over in different pieces. There’s another image of your mom holding you when you’re six months old in her arms. There are photos of Janet and Byron and Dora that are collaged into the works. When you look at those works, how do you make sense of the way that he mixes his family life into and amongst these other images?



Janet Begneaud (then Rauschenberg) as Yambilee Queen, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1949. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Calvin & Inez Blue



Robert Rauschenberg
Bubba's Sister (Ruminations), 2000
Intaglio
23 x 31 1/2 inches (58.4 x 80 cm)
From an edition of 46, published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York

Begneaud: Well those images are early images. I guess when you asked the question I was trying to think what Bob would have been thinking back then, but that'd be hard to do really. I'm thinking about what Bob was thinking because I'm thinking how I would have been thinking, using my own family, because I've made some pieces for my grandparents. I don't know if you saw those when you were in Lafayette, but there were some I did with my mom's parents and then I did one for my dad with his parents. Those felt good to me to do because it was giving those guys something to remember. Not that they don't remember, but something they get to look at rather than having a little photograph or something hanging on the wall. I think it was in some way for Bob involving his family in his world a little bit more deeply.

Q: As a way of including them.

Begneaud: I think so.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: I think so.

Q: How do you think the South remained with him? Do you think that it's something that continued to be part of his identity throughout his life?

Begneaud: Oh, I think so. I think so because he talked about it a lot in stories and it pretty much always came up in a conversation at some point in the evening. Some aspect of it.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: How would it come up?

Begneaud: Well, I don't think in anything specific, but it would be something about Dora. Bob always called his mom Dora. Even to Dora he called her Dora, yes.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Or his dad. Bob had some elaborate stories. He was a good storyteller. But I think those roots were always firmly there for him. I think he was proud of—not necessarily proud to be from Port Arthur, but it’s definitely part of his story and I think he was happy to have that aspect. The stories about Port Arthur weren’t always glowing.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: But it’s sort of a stepping-stone for him in wherever that story may have come from or wherever it was going.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: It’s like me being Cajun. People know I’m Cajun; I’m happy even proud to be a Cajun from south Louisiana. I think in the same way, Bob was, being from Port Arthur.

Q: What about his religious upbringing? You referred to him earlier as someone who remained spiritual throughout his life, but—

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: —he obviously stopped attending the Church of Christ.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: How do you think he worked through that and where do you think that continued to dwell within him?

Begneaud: I think when he left town he was done with that probably. I think you grow up believing what your parents believe because that's all you know really, especially if you're in a small town. And then when you get to other parts of the world where you realize there are other viewpoints and other ideas you start to challenge what you think you know is correct or whatever your beliefs may be. I think that's what happened with Bob. He never put it down or anything, but he shifted to a sort of a more, what's the word? A worldly viewpoint of spirituality; that it exists, but doesn't exist in a little house, some church or whatever, because somebody says it's so. He didn't really talk about that so much. I think part of the reason around me he never talked about it so much is because he knew Janet was way religious. That was one thing—Bob would tell some funky stories about family, but he never said anything once ever about Janet in a negative way. He would jokingly say stuff about his mom and dad—

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Janet will say, "That never happened," or something. [Laughs]

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Bob would embellish those a bit. But he never said anything unkind about Janet.

Q: What about when you were older and he could see that you were making a similar choice and moving away from the church? Was there ever a time where that was acknowledged?

Begneaud: I don't think so. Not that I remember.

Q: So you just touched upon something else that I wanted to ask you about, which is that a couple times in conversations that I've had here David [White] has said, "Bob says this, but Janet will say that's not true."

[Laughter]

Q: What are some of those instances and did you ever have the opportunity to watch them hash something out?

Begneaud: Only on the level where at dinner Bob would be telling someone a story about his dad or Dora. They never hashed it out, but Janet would say, "Oh Bob." "My daddy," he would say sometimes that his dad didn't like him or something like that and Janet would say, "Bob, come on." Because my mom took it a little more personally because she was not—I don't know what the word is. She wasn't standing up for them, but she was like, "Oh don't make them sound like they didn't like you," or something like that.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: I'm sure growing up there were some times where he probably felt that way because we all felt that way or similar; parents, when you're young, growing up, and you know better than they do or so you think you do. But I don't remember specific things—I know I've probably heard them, I just can't remember what those would be.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Janet would remember a lot more about that. Did you get into that with her at all?

Q: Yes, a little bit. Yes.

Begneaud: She remembers everything.

[Laughter]

Q: Did your kids get to know Bob?

Begneaud: They did, they did, yes. Dylan was little bitty when we moved here. He was less than a year old. Dylan's middle name is Rauschenberg. We knew Chris and Janet weren't planning to have any kids so we thought, well let's let the name go a little bit further down the road. Then Logan [Begneaud] was born here so Bob got to spend a lot of time—because he was here sometimes twice a month, sometimes once a month—

Q: Right.

Begneaud: He was great. He loved—he got to spend a lot of time with those guys. They would travel, go to openings, and go all over the place with them. And they spent lots of time in Captiva. My mom loved the beach or still loves the beach and whenever she was going, whether I was going or not, she would grab the kids to go down there. So yes, he got to spend a lot of time with them.

Q: Did he like kids?

Begneaud: He did.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Yes, he was great with kids. [Laughs] And the kids seemed to like him.

Q: Your mom told me about a lunch with the Queen of Norway who was here.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: I guess you were living here and Dylan was two and Logan was a newborn and the Queen of Norway was here on one of the neon bikes.

Begneaud: The neon bike was upstairs, yes. Or from here, downstairs, yes.

Q: So in 1991, Bob went back to Port Arthur where he was recognized by the State of Texas and Governor Ann Richards for his contribution to twentieth-century art and this day [February 25] was proclaimed Robert Rauschenberg Day. Were you there for that?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Yes? So can you tell me about that day?

Begneaud: Yes. I can't remember the place, but we all stayed out at this big—what was this place? It was a big complex, mansion-type place. I had a ton of my friends in town and my mom had a ton of her friends in town. It was interesting because Bob did it, but he wasn't super thrilled to be back in Port Arthur. There were all these people coming up to Bob and saying, "I remember you, we were in the same class!" I don't know, I could sense in Bob his being very cautious and holding back because everybody wanted to be part of this. "Oh, I know Bob Rauschenberg." But they didn't really know Bob, I don't think. But it was a pretty fun weekend. [Laughs] One of my friends went around interviewing a lot of people. He'd never interviewed anybody in his life. He was one of my buddies and made this really funny tape, which I should find at some point. I don't know where it is. It's somewhere around. I thought my friend had made a copy and put it in the archives or someplace. And then my dad was there. I don't know how to say it. It was like a family weekend, but I felt like Bob felt like he was really out of place

there. Not to put those folks down there, everybody was very sweet, but it wasn't the kind of people Bob was typically hanging out with for the last several years. I feel like he was sort of, grin and bear it a little bit.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: My parting image of that weekend was—my friend, Rusty [Eddy], had found an old accordion somewhere and the morning we were leaving, Bob was out in the front yard playing this beat-up old accordion out in the front yard [laughs] at ten o'clock in the morning. It was an interesting weekend for sure.

Q: [Laughs] Was it strange to see Bob back in that environment?

Begneaud: Yes. Because the furthest he got out of his world was coming to Lafayette.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: Because he'd come back to see his mom basically. He'd come back to see Dora, usually once a year, and there were some years he didn't come. Later when my grandmother started getting a little older, he started making a point to come down and visit.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: That was still out of his element really. He enjoyed coming there because my parents' friends were a couple of friends who Bob became friends with, that he would love to come down and hang out with. But then going to Port Arthur was another level that was way even further out of his element. He dealt with it pretty well though.

Q: Will you tell me about some of the times that he came back to Lafayette? I heard he'd come back for your grandmother's birthday.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: How would you normally celebrate Dora's birthday?

Begneaud: We would go to dinner. He would come in for a day and a half or two days sometimes. It was basically just going to dinner. It was pretty mellow. Usually Bob would come and we would have friends over to my parents' house.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: My friends and some of my parents' friends. Bob refused to do the thing with my grandmother having all the church ladies come. He was like, "I'm not doing that, no."

[Laughter]

Begneaud: “That’s out of bounds.”

Q: What did she want to do?

Begneaud: She wanted her church friends to meet Bob.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: I think Bob was like, that’s pushing the limit, there. But he would usually go and sleep at Dora’s house. I think Bob designed that house actually.

Q: Right, yes.

Begneaud: We’d usually have a party when Bob came to town with everybody there. Somewhat raucous, everybody drinking and of course my grandmother never took a sip of alcohol in her life. Then there would be one quiet night and we’d all have dinner with my grandmother usually. And then Bob was out of there.

Q: What was he like with his mom?

Begneaud: They had a really sweet connection. I think the older they both got, the closer they got. They were always close, but I think even closer—or I guess in touch more often. Bob totally took care of my grandmother back when she got sick and had a little stroke. She had anything

she wanted really. He'd call me and say, "You got to go get her a new car. You got to go get— make her do this." He took care of her quite well.

Q: So when Bob suffered his stroke in 2001, I heard that you went to Captiva to spend some time there to get him home from the hospital. Can you tell me about that time?

Begneaud: Well it was odd for me because it was a completely different vibe going on there. Usually Bob was in full swing. I was there to help take care of stuff and I was certainly not the only one doing that. There were a lot of other people there. But it was a bit of a struggle for me, just because I'm not really good at that stuff. I don't know if anybody's good at it, but I felt a bit uncomfortable with that. It was challenging for sure because things were different for Bob too. He wasn't in full-scale Bob-dom. [Laughs] He was usually in control of everything.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: He was obviously forced to step back and reassess a little bit.

Q: What do you think his reflections were at that time? Or did he speak about that at all?

Begneaud: Not so much.

Q: No?

Begneaud: Not so much.

Q: So his experience was very internal?

Begneaud: I think so. He probably spoke more with Darryl about that kind of stuff than with me. We talked about a lot of deep stuff, but that wasn't the kind of thing he would talk with me about necessarily.

Q: How do you remember his recovery period and his return to work and the adjustments that were made around him?

Begneaud: It was a slow transition, but when Bob decided to do something, that was it. He was right-handed and now he had to start doing things with his left hand. Always having a camera around his neck when he was traveling or going out, taking photographs—he wasn't able to do that anymore. So now it was handing off a camera to someone else. He made it work. Luckily he had a lot of people who really love him and would say, "I'll do that." "I'll help you." He always had assistants. Not always, but lately he had assistants and everybody was so great with him. I think he certainly got frustrated by the fact that he couldn't do everything himself. I don't think it made him angry necessarily. But you could see his patience wasn't as great as it used to be. I think he came to terms with that a little bit. Like this is the way it is and I'm going to make it work some kind of way.

Q: And that remained a new and permanent—

Begneaud: I think it did, yes.

Q: —reality.

Begneaud: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay so that was in 2001. What were your encounters like with Bob over the next seven years?

Begneaud: Well, I didn't get to hang out with Bob as much in those later years as I did before. Before I got married I hung out with Bob a lot. And then when I got married—it's like when your friends have kids.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: You used to drop over their house all the time and then they have kids and you don't drop over. You still see them occasionally, but it's not like college. I still tried to go to openings and we'd still go down to Captiva, take the kids and go visit Bob. But it was different. It was different for everybody. I'd still try to call Bob every Sunday. I'd call him, whether I'd get a hold of him or not, I'd try at least to call him on every Sunday. It was our ritual for the last several years—just to say hi, chat for five or ten minutes. It continued that way until things went away. [Laughs] When Bob went away. Yes.

Q: When he did pass away, you were one of the speakers at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] event.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Can you say a little bit about what you said that day?

Begneaud: Well, speaking was not my forte. I remember parts of that.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: I was a little nervous being in front of a lot of folks like that. [Laughs] I don't know, it felt good to just speak a few minutes about Bob because I had that long history with him, that long, varied, wild, interesting—one of the most interesting and great relationships I ever had in my life was with Bob. He taught me so many things and influenced me in so many ways that I'm still discovering things to this day that he influenced me about. I felt like I was in a little bit of a bubble up there because my mom spoke for a bit longer than me. I was just nervous being up there honestly. But then when I started talking I really wasn't nervous. I was nervous waiting to talk.

Q: Right.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Then when I started talking it was like, oh it's fine.

Q: Yeah.

Begneaud: I was okay with it. But I remember little bits about what I said. I thought I was going to write stuff down, but then I thought, ah, I'm just going to talk and see what happens. That was the best thing for me.

Q: What are your other memories of that day?

Begneaud: Well the other memory was that my mom was nervous she was going to talk too long.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: I said, "There's no time limit, just talk. Just say whatever you want to say."

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: She goes, "I don't want to come off being silly." I go, "Just talk, you're going to be fine." And she was great. One thing I thought was odd about that day was that there were two different rooms going on simultaneously. I think [William J.] Bill Clinton was in the other room.

I never figured out—I know they were trying to accommodate a certain amount of people, but I thought it was odd that you picked a room to be in and that's what your—

Q: Experience was.

Begneaud: —experience was. All I heard were bits and pieces about what happened in the other room. And maybe that was the perfect thing for Bob. Bob was just like, be where you are now, that total Zen thing. It didn't really matter what's happening anywhere else.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: [Laughs] Just be where you are. So maybe that was the big takeaway from that.

Q: [Laughs] When I interviewed [Richard] Dickie Landry, he said that you gave him some of Bob's ashes.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: How did you guys decide whom to give the ashes to?

Begneaud: It was unanimous that my mom got the bulk of them. When we were in Captiva, we christened Janet and Dylan was there and my dad didn't take part in it, but we walked through the jungle in Captiva and spread ashes around. I'm sure Chris took some with him. My mom

took the bulk of the ashes. I thought there were a few people who would really appreciate having a little bit of Bob there. Dickie was one.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: It was so interesting. I took some to Captiva and I have them in a little thing in my studio. And there's a little ring in one from Bob's pacemaker that didn't melt. Anyway it's interesting. It's not Bob, but it's kind of Bob.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: It feels good having him around.

Q: Who else did you give a little bit of ash to? Dickie and who else?

Begneaud: Well, I think I gave a little bit to Weir. I don't remember who else I gave ashes to. There might have been another person or two.

Q: Okay. So when you see Bob's work now in an institution, in a museum—I don't know if this happens, or if it doesn't, if you could imagine—you're walking through a museum with a friend or something, who maybe is less familiar with Bob's work. Are there specific things that you most often find yourself wanting to convey about Bob or his art? Things that you want people to know?

Begneaud: That stuff, it usually matters whom I'm with and it's usually something that pops up in the moment.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: When I'm looking at a piece, depending on what it is, I'll flash back on something, on some story. I'll usually tell some story that's really important to me [laughs] and the other person may chuckle about it. But there's nothing in general really.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: It really depends on who I'm with. A lot of my friends got to hang out with Bob and meet Bob and so sometimes I'll say, "Oh, you remember that time we were this—remember—oh Bob said this and—" and that usually starts a conversation with someone who knew Bob about stuff that I'd forgotten about.

Q: Right.

Begneaud: And then it turns into this fun little conversation. If it's someone who had never met Bob but knows about Bob then other kinds of stories come up, more fundamental things about Bob, how his character was and his genuine sweetness and graciousness and all those things come into play. No one thing really pops in for me.

Q: Is there a story that you find yourself most often telling people?

Begneaud: Not really. There are some that I've told more than others. I always love telling the fly story.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: That was just so perfectly Bob. Oh there are so many crazy stories with him. That's really fun.

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Fun times. The guy turned me onto the world really.

[Laughter]

Q: Is there a particular way that you remember him in your mind's eye, a particular image of him or—

Begneaud: I still hear him laughing. Smiling and laughing. When he'd look at you, he always had that look, almost like he knew what you were thinking and you should know what he was thinking. Or at least I had that kind of connection with him. A lot of times he wouldn't even have

to say anything. He'd just look at you and you'd just know whatever it was. I think about those things a lot. He was just a great guy in all aspects.



Rauschenberg at his 70th birthday party at the Felsen residence, with Rick and Janet Begneaud, Los Angeles, October 1995.
Photo: Sidney B. Felsen

Q: All right.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you would like to speak about?

Begneaud: Let's see. I can't think of anything really.

Q: Okay. All right, well, thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]