

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Matt Hall

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Matt Hall conducted by Sara Sinclair on February 17, 2015. This interview is 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: Matt Hall

Location: Captiva, Florida

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: February 17, 2015

Q: Today is the 17th of February 2015. This is Sara Sinclair with Matt Hall at the Rauschenberg Residency in Captiva, Florida. So to begin today, maybe you could just tell me a little bit about where you're from and some of your early memories.

Hall: Sure. Again, as you said, my name is Matt Hall and I was born in Dayton, Ohio, north Dayton actually, a little town called Englewood. Two brothers. Both parents were supervisors. One was an air traffic controller. My mom was a labor and delivery room nurse supervisor. Yes, I had a great, typical Midwestern upbringing. Played a lot of sports and was a pretty crazy youth. When I graduated, it was 1982. I was born in '64 and in '82 there was a big recession in Ohio. So things like Dayton Press and Delco [Electronics Corporation] / GM [General Motors Company] and all these things that you were thinking about when you graduated from high school, for jobs, were leaving. I was a wrestler and I tore up my knee so I really didn't have an option for wrestling in college. A friend of the family—their daughter was working down here on Captiva at a place called South Seas Plantation [South Seas Island Resort], which is a resort at the very tip of Captiva. The property here basically surrounds all of South Seas and I'll get to that—how Bob acquired it and that whole thing because I was very interested in that story.

Getting back to graduating, I graduated in June, and my grandparents lived in Punta Gorda [Florida], which is about an hour north of here. I had worked in the restaurant business on the side for spending money—that's how I started, when I was about fourteen—and so I actually came down and had an interview at South Seas Plantation because I was looking to get out of Dayton. When I came down and interviewed and I came over the causeway and I—Bob's story about when he got here and my story are very similar. We were just blown away, coming over the causeway and seeing how beautiful it is here and I was just captivated. I always needed to be near water or mountains, so obviously, there's a lot of water around here, as you've seen. That was, for me, to come over the bridge that day was just wow. If I can get a job here, it would be awesome. Basically, I wanted to come down here for a year and figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

When I did the interview out here for a restaurant position, it was kind of ironic because they literally—I had interviewed and then they had changed the serving age to serve alcohol from eighteen to twenty-one. When I went back, they told me there was a hiring freeze and because they had changed the drinking age that there wasn't really a position for me. Of course I was bummed out because it was so beautiful. Then I got a call—it was probably about a month later—and I had never met my friend's daughter. It was just one of those pseudo-acquaintances. Anyway, they had said there's a job, but you have to get here now, and it just so happened it was the day before Christmas.

So I left Christmas night—or actually Christmas morning at 4:00 AM, my '74 Chevelle completely packed up and got on the road and I broke down in Cleveland, Tennessee. Hitchhiked

on Interstate 75 and spent a night. Finally got out here and started working at South Seas in the restaurant business. On that note, I had heard about Bob. It was this artist. I don't know if you've been to the beach yet, but the beach now is 150 feet wide. Well when I started here in '82, they weren't doing the beach re-nourishment program. So Bob's beach house was probably 20 feet from the water and I would walk the beach at night. I just loved it out here. It was just so spectacular and full moons and all that.

I would be walking by his house and there were always these parties going on, it seemed to me. Lights were on and this funky-looking artwork stuff hanging. I was like that must be that artist guy's place. That was '82. I worked in restaurants around the island. I did everything, cooked, managed, tried to buy a couple. I ended up at the Mucky Duck restaurant, which is a famous restaurant out here, and Bob was a customer, a periodic customer. He loved fried oysters, so he'd come in there and get fried oysters. I got to know who he was. Certainly didn't know—have any idea—how big of an artist, how influential he was in the art world.

Kind of moving along, getting to about 1993, '92, I was working there and [Rodney] Tup Schmidt was one of the employees here. We played in a softball league. We got to talking—actually he was in there one day and could tell I'd about had it with tourists in season—especially some of the Canadians, who were very rude and think tipping is just a city in China. So he said, “Hey,”—I knew he worked for Rauschenberg—and he said, “We're looking for someone to possibly take the property on,” and at that time, I had met my wife at South Seas. We had—my son was born. She was working days; I was working nights. I was really looking to get out of the business, so I said, “Well, sure. I'll come over and take a look at the property.”

It was after work and I had a beer in my hand and we walked around this property and I had no idea that he had 22 acres. I was just blown away by the size of the property and the old buildings. We have nine buildings. The oldest one was built in 1920, so it was just amazing. I was like wow. Yes, that'd be great. The funniest part was—as we finished our tour around the property, I ended up over at the Gulf House, which Bob just happened to have moved into that year. As we were going to go up the stairs to meet Bob or talk to Bob, he happened to be coming out on the porch. Tup said, “Bob, this is Matt Hall. He’s thinking about taking the property on.” Originally they were just looking for a gardener—and I was looking for anything to get out of the business—or caretaker, whatever you’d like to call it.

Bob came out and I said, “Mr. Rauschenberg, good to see you again.” He said, “Oh Matt. Don’t call me Mr. Rauschenberg. Call me Bob.” And I don’t know why I said this, but I said, “Bob, B-O-B. Backwards or forwards, it’s still the same.” And he goes, “Yes.” I said, “Well, that reminds me of a joke about the dyslexic who tried to commit suicide.” He goes, “Really?” I said, “Yes, he jumped behind the train.” Bob starts cackling. He’s just laughing and laughing and laughing, and I’m going, it’s not really that funny of a joke. And he looked at me, he said, “I’m dyslexic. See you Monday.” And that was my interview. That was literally it. And so I started in ’93.

This place, when I started in ’93—for the first two years I did nothing but clear—was just so overgrown. The turn here by the road didn’t even have—now it has a blinking light because people would miss the turn. When I cleared that, there were headlamps and tires and bumpers. I just really concentrated on getting the property really prettied up, so to speak. Bob always liked

controlled chaos. He liked certain areas kept very pristine and that would have been the studio area and things of that nature. We had a very similar sense that way. From the get-go, a lot of times he wouldn't really have to tell me. I just kind of knew what he was looking for. That was a lot of the way with Bob.

Everybody who worked here—and at that time there was Bradley [J.] Jeffries, who was Bob's personal assistant. [Pamela] Pam Schmidt. You had Lawrence Voytek, who was Bob's fabricator; Laurence Getford, who was basically IT [information technology], but also worked on the imaging and those kinds of things. You had Phillip Woods, who was also keeping the houses clean, but also would help Bob pack and was there to help him out with anything he needed. And Tup Schmidt, Rodney Schmidt. It was a nice, small crew and the unique thing about Bob was—I always remember someone said well, you never said it wasn't your job. Everything was everybody's job and that's how Bob felt about it. That was always, to me, very cool. Then basically, like I said, just getting the property going and then it was kind of graduating into hey, we need a hand in the studio, whether it was in the shop downstairs working on framing. Then there'd be times—I'd come in and I was just filthy from being outside and everybody had to be somewhere and Bob would say, "Hey, you want to stick around and help me work tonight?" I was like, "Sure."

It was always get yourself a drink. But right away I was very sensitive and in tune to the way that he worked when he was creating. We always had a TV on. There was always that background sort of noise or whatever you would call it. It was usually CBS, anything but Fox, which I won't go into, the political side of that. It was just that kind of way and you knew he'd be sitting there

and you'd talk about anything with Bob. That was what was so amazing. How down to earth he was, how real he was, how passionate he was about everything. Politics, sex, drugs, rock and roll, didn't matter. Conversations just could go anywhere. Then in the middle of that conversation you would just see him sort of glance over at the table that he was working on and then he'd just go quiet. So then you knew it was time to get to work and that was always one of his famous, "Get to work," kind of comments.

That was really amazing for me. I was just always learning, always changing. That was '93 and then in '95 we hired a gentleman by the name of Alan Rapleje who basically started to take over the groundskeeping aspect of the property. I graduated more into not only assisting with the fabrication, as well as whatever was needed when we had installations here, if we had a collector coming, those kinds of things. Lawrence Voytek was so amazing as a teacher, teaching me how to weld and a lot of the fabrication skills that he knew. Lawrence was a graduate from RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence] and just an amazing person, very talented.

Then in '97 Bob and Darryl [R. Pottorf]—I forgot to mention Darryl Pottorf. He was also here on the original staff. They asked me to be the compound manager. So basically it was really then all the buildings, inside and out, maintenance, whatever that entailed, keeping up with the buildings. Then working more and more with the artwork, assisting Lawrence and whoever else needed help in the shop. One of the amazing stories—the conversations with Bob—I so wish that my eyes and my brain could have been a camera and a recorder because it was just—the stories were always so amazing. Whether it was Merce Cunningham or John Cage or their travels around the country and when they were doing their performances and the dancers he worked



with and it was just so amazing, his life story. Also about growing up in Port Arthur, Texas and about his sister and his parents and those amazing things that he would share.

On that same note, he was very interested in your life and he was very interested in my history and my family. I always thought that was just so amazing and that kind of segues into '97 when he had his retrospective [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997–98]. Of course, that wasn't just, "Oh, I'm going to have a retrospective." That took five years in planning, which involved everybody. The archives, the history, David White. Now this is the Captiva crew and then in New York Thomas Buehler and David White and Gina [Guy] and before Gina—and I apologize—I forget the gal's name who was there for years.

Q: Was it [Debra] Debbie Taylor or?

Hall: No. Well, that might be—yes, I think it was Debbie [note: Denise LeBeau]. And you had [Hisachika] Sachika Takahashi, who was a character. Everybody was a character. On that note, the unique thing about everybody who worked for Bob, I don't remember hearing any kind of, "I'm looking for a this person or I'm looking for—" It was almost like you found each other. It was kind of like I was looking to get out of the restaurant business. Boom, it happened, to work with Bob. And I don't know if in your interviews with people, especially with any of the staff members, of how that all—it just seemed to progress that way and it was just amazing. Now whether he was a magnet and you just gravitated towards him—it was just amazing that way. For

instance in how much he cared about us as staff. He called us family. It was just one of those things. That was the way he was.

I'll never forget and I try to tell this without getting emotional because in '97 I'd never been to New York City. Bob was having this big retrospective at the Guggenheim and everything that's going on. Lawrence Voytek—his wife Mary [Voytek] said, “Oh, you guys are going, right?” And I said, “Well, yes, we're going.” We were looking for a cheap place. Didn't have a lot of money. So we ended up staying at this hotel down on the Bowery. I remember calling the place because it was—I don't know—thirty-two dollars a night and for an extra seven dollars you could have a shower in your room. I was like we'll have a shower in the room. Great story about that was—“Okay Bob, I'm coming to the retrospective.” He says, “Great, great, we'll see you up there,” and of course I didn't know what to expect. It just so happened, I got blessed, my mom happened to be in town giving a lecture. So I was like, “Mom, you've got to go to this opening.” She's like, “Okay.” Same thing. Didn't really know about Bob's art. She knew how much I enjoyed working for him and what an awesome person he was.

We get to JFK [John F. Kennedy International Airport, Queens, New York] and we used Bob's car service and of course there was this limo. There happened to be John and Chloe Hugill, and John was a plastic surgeon and his wife was an artist, and they had met Bob and just loved Bob. So we see them at the thing and we go, “Oh, we'll share a car.” So the funny story about that is—we get in the car with this Russian limo driver. He says, “Where to?” and they were staying somewhere by the UN [United Nations] building—or no, by the [Jacob K.] Javits [Convention] Center, I believe it was. He was like, “Okay,” and he says, “Where are you staying?” and I gave

him the address. He goes, “Oh, you do not want to go there.” And I’m like, “No, it’s where we’re staying.” He waited until we got into the hotel. Back then, in ’97, it hadn’t been cleaned—the Bowery was still a pretty rough part of town.

The cool thing was, it was only about three and a half blocks from Bob’s place, which was awesome. So we get there. We get in the hotel and the first day we meander around Chinatown and that kind of getting acclimated to the city and our hotel room, which was a futon. And the shower was—the seven-dollar-a-night shower was great. You could just squirt soap on the walls and spin and you were washed. That’s how small it was. But anyways, the long story about that was, the day of the opening, my cell phone rings and I recognize the number and it was [381] Lafayette Street. I’m thinking, “Oh, maybe Bob needs something.” And it was Bob and he said, “Sweets, what are you and Teresa [Riska-Hall] doing?” I said, “Well, we’re getting ready to go to the opening.” He says, “Well, if you want, come on by 381 Lafayette.” I’m like okay, sure.

So Teresa and I were walking up the Bowery and, of course, my wife is saying hi to all the guys lying in the street. I’m like, Teresa, it’s New York City. Just keep your head down. Let’s just get there. Anyways, so we get buzzed into Bob’s building and I was expecting all the staff to be there or this pre kind of get together and it was Janet [Begneaud, née Rauschenberg], his sister, Darryl, Bob, Teresa, and I. It didn’t even really sink in then. Now, it really, really does. But here is a guy—here is an artist, one of the most famous artists in the world, and he’s thinking about the gardener on the biggest day of his career. I say it now and I get emotional because it just—it really hit home that he knew it was my first trip to New York City and he wanted to make sure we were okay. And that, to this day, still just—it blows me away. And you had this beautiful

Joseph—well, it was interesting—Joseph Beuys suit on that he had. That’s what he wore to the opening.

Q: What did it look like?

Hall: To me, it looked like a multicolored packing blanket.

Q: Okay.

Hall: You know what I mean? Have you seen a packing blanket with all the different—seriously, that’s what it looked like. Bob had had it taken out and he had a red silk lining put in it because—I really think it was a packing blanket. I’m just saying, no offense, Joseph. And I think it was probably itchy and that’s what he wore to the opening. Anyways, I took some great pictures of him and Janet in front of a *Hoarfrost*, one of the series he did [1974–76], and I had them developed and he had that picture by his bedside. Just those little things that kind of blew you away.



Rauschenberg and Janet Begneaud at Rauschenberg’s Lafayette Street studio on opening night of *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997. Rauschenberg pictured wearing his *Filanzug (Felt Suit)* (1970) by Joseph Beuys. Photograph Collection Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Matt Hall

Like every opening that Bob ever went to, people go, “Oh my gosh, he’s so amazing at the openings.” The thing that always blew me away is that there was the Bob you saw in his robe, and just like you or me, I’m sure, around our home, and then the Bob that—when he would go to these openings, it was amazing. He’d be throwing up. He’d be getting ill. He’d be nervous, just like anybody. Stage fright. And then this calm and this look and just a light bulb would go off, and then there’s the Bob, so to speak. Same thing. We had a bottle of champagne at 381. He had a couple sips, went in the bathroom. I think he got sick. Came out. Of course, he was late for the limo. “You never want to be early to your openings,” he said. “Makes you feel desperate or something,” he said. I always laughed at that. “Makes you look desperate.”

He goes to the opening and we picked up my mom somewhere, I think, in a taxi. And this is the amazing thing for me, being an uneducated art person, just knowing Bob for the person and knowing Bob on Captiva. We pull up to the Guggenheim and there are literally five Greyhound buses lined up. The line around goes around the entire building. To me, it was my big eye-opener, that this guy is a pretty big deal in the art world. It was one of those things. It never—hell, you had computers then, but it’s not like you’re Googling Bob Rauschenberg. I knew that he was a famous and wealthy artist, but I had no idea of the size and the work and the influence and how much he’s impacted the world as a whole. That was a real eye-opener for me.

As staff, when we went to openings, we always would be within eyesight of Bob because you could tell when he was getting overwhelmed. It was a mob scene. Dennis Hopper and Morley Safer—the list goes on and on, of the people who were there and wanted a piece of his time. As

staff, we would always just be looking because if he caught your eye, he'd give you a little nod, and that's when we would circle the wagons, if you will, where we would just circle him and give him a moment—glass of water, glass of wine, glass of Jack Daniel's, whatever the case may be at the time, just to give him a moment to breathe. I always thought that was amazing because it was never something that we rehearsed or it was never something he asked us to do. I think it was just that care. That we always were looking out for him and the same thing for him, looking out for us. That was my first real eye-opening art experience with Bob.



Dennis Hopper and Rauschenberg at the opening of *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 1997. Photograph Collection Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Then going to the off-site, the Guggenheim and the other two galleries [Guggenheim Museum Soho and Guggenheim Museum at Ace Gallery, New York] and it was the first time I'd seen *The 1/4 Mile*, the *Furlong Piece* [*The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, 1981–98], which I'd seen in books but had never seen up close. One of those little side stories about that, I'll never forget, was he did a piece in *The 1/4 Mile* and it was literally library books stacked in vertical stacks, and they were probably 12, 15 feet tall at least, and there were four of them, I believe [five]. As I was walking up close to them, I looked very closely at one and it said Captiva public library. And I thought, "Oh man, that is really cool." So I saw that show, but on a little side note about

that, I was on a flight probably six or seven years later, back from—I think I was in Denver—and sat down next to this lovely older lady and we got to talking. I’m not a shy person. So, “Where are you from” and dah, dah, dah. She says, “Oh my god, Captiva.” She goes, “I was the Captiva librarian from—” I think she said the seventies, one of the original librarians there. And then she said, “Where do you work?” I said, “Well, I manage the Rauschenberg property.” “Oh, Bob!” I’m like, “Yes, Bob.” She says, “Well, let me tell you a story.”



Robert Rauschenberg  
*The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, 1981–98 (detail)  
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

He had a Suburban and she was closing up that day and back then they used to just throw the old books in the dumpster. Well here’s Bob with the Suburban backed up to the dumpster, halfway hanging out of the dumpster, throwing books into the back. So that is probably where that came from in the *Furlong*. And that always amazed me. Another story too, is about behind the old studio—the property has changed. We’re in the new studio, where we’re doing this interview. This was built in 1990 and we moved him in here in ’93 when I started here. It was kind of

ironic. Both his last home and his studio—I was at the beginning of that, so kind of always dated that way.



Exterior of Rauschenberg's Captiva Drive studio, ca. 1993. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

So it was always hilarious with the found objects that Bob used so much throughout his career in his artwork. Behind the old studio was this big wood deck platform and when I started here, to me, it's a fence. It's junk. It was just stuff. Bottles and metal and letters, metal letters, and ladders and stuff. So I'll never forget one day—and Bob was always very—if you set yourself up, he was very quick with taking you down at the knees. But I remember saying to him, I said, "Boss," I go, "Do you want me to clean up that junk pile?" "That's not a junk pile! That's the lizard garden!" I'm like okay, the lizard garden. Well, you haven't been here very long. We have a lot of little lizards around here. Those things were all over that pile, but that was just hilarious to me. It's the lizard garden. And then obviously, not knowing—and then once I started working with him and seeing the older pieces and that—that this was very important, that these were found objects that he used in his sculptures.



And on that note too, Bob's sense of humor. Some of the best laughs of my life—almost on the ground, both of us. That cackle of his, that laugh of his. He just loved to laugh, he loved to smile. It just didn't matter, bad joke, good joke. Lawrence Voytek, classic. He always had these jokes that were just oh my gosh. Half of them weren't that great, but some of them were pretty good zingers. I just always remember that smile, I always remember that laugh. It didn't matter who it was. I remember [Edward James Martin] Ted Koppel at our Christmas party one year here in Captiva and Bob hated those—or I shouldn't say hated—but he strongly disliked those art questions, the patented art questions. So I'm at the kitchen counter because I always—Bob and I and food—I'll elaborate more about food and cooking with him. Anyway, so Ted Koppel is there and there was this beautiful piece behind the kitchen counter and Ted looks at it and he says, “So, Bob. Tell me, what was your motivation for that piece?” Bob just rolled his eyes and said, “Money, dummy.” I was like oh Jesus criminy, he just called Ted Koppel a dummy. Ted Koppel was never back for Christmas. I don't know. It was just kind of one of those things. Bob—he just didn't—and not saying that Ted Koppel's a fool or anything, not judging him whatsoever, but Bob just didn't suffer fools very well. He was very, very astute at that, I think.

On that note too, when the phone rang, you just never knew. We would always sort of filter calls for Bob, whether he was at the studio or his house and it was part of the deal that—the phone rang, you answered and just said, “Hello.” You didn't say Rauschenberg residence or anything like that. But you just never knew who was going to call. Princess of Japan, Hillary [Rodham] Clinton, [Johan Wilhelm] Billy Klüver of Experiments in Art and Technology [E.A.T.]. I always loved to hear his voice. You'd answer the phone and say hello, and he'd go, “Hello. This is Billy Klüver. Is Bob there?” And you just never knew, in other words, who was calling or who was

coming. [Jacqueline] Jackie [Bouvier Kennedy] Onassis's sister is staying at the Bay House and Bob's—his giving of his artwork to charities. It just never ceased to amaze me how many different causes he was passionate about, whether it was plants, women's rights, homelessness, AIDS.

One day we were sitting in the kitchen and I can't remember if it was the newspaper or it came over a television program, but it was leprosy. He just slams this book he was reading or looking through a magazine and he said, "Matt, do you know there's a hundred thousand people who still have leprosy? Can you believe this, in 1998?" or whatever it was. And he goes, "Call Bradley. I want to write a check. What's it going to cost to cure leprosy?" Just that passion, that zeal for things that he felt shouldn't be an issue for people. And I've never forgotten that and I don't know if it's because of his sort of poor upbringing. Janet says it's not as bad as Bob said and I said well, we all talk that way about our childhood. It's either better or worse than we always thought it was. But I think that definitely not having stuff, not having things, that Bob was so passionate about everybody and animals—except for the raccoons that would eat his mangos. That was always funny—don't hurt that animal, but keep those damn raccoons off my mangos. We had mango trees here that we would clean every year and Bob would ship them to people all over the world.

On that note, food. That was our real connection. Obviously not art because I was not an artist and not art trained, but food. I was a sous-chef. Loved to cook, loved to eat, loved to experiment with food, so it was always experimentations, kind of like his paintings. You start with a canvas, okay, it's the pot. And then you would start with—let's say it's clams or whatever the case may

be. But his recipes, I know Pam was like, “Yes, I know them, but they always change,” so it wasn’t like you had a book of recipes. It was like let’s try this. So much just like his art was the way he cooked and he loved food. Food was always a part of—I always said I’d love to be Bob’s guest here on the property because there were always flowers in your room when you got there. Sorry we didn’t get any in your room. But there was always that and then there were always meals, like you would come look at the artwork, then you would break for lunch, so one of us would be over there stirring the pot or making the soup or helping—whatever the case may be. And I just loved that about him.

We would watch the food channel for hours upon hours and, “Oh, let’s try that.” At Christmas, he always got Iranian caviar, bird’s nest soup. He loved the exotic stuff, but then he loved the plain Popeyes [Louisiana Kitchen] fried chicken. So I might be coming—“Bring me some Popeyes fried chicken.” It just didn’t matter. I really enjoyed that with him in the kitchen and again, the conversations would just be anywhere and everywhere, about food.

I used to come out with my family. He was so gracious with the property here and in New York. I wanted to come out and if there wasn’t anybody staying, you could come out. We used to come out for New Year’s Eve. So I would always stop and pick up clams and oysters and shrimp and do a big steam pot for him and he just absolutely loved that. In fact Dorothy and Roy Lichtenstein were here one year and you just never knew who he was inviting. It was just this big pot of seafood, steamed seafood, and sushi. So we could talk about food for days on end and just absolutely loved that part of it.

Q: Janet actually told me a really funny story about some kind of seashell soup experiment? She said Bob loved these shells that were beautiful on the beach. They were pink and yellow and blue, and he would gather them.

Hall: Oh, coquinas.

Q: He would gather them up and try to boil them and make a soup, and she said it was one of his less successful experiments because no matter how much you rinsed the shells, there would always just be this thick layer of mud at the bottom of the pot.

Hall: Yes, yes. I remember talking about that, coquinas. And they're tiny, so the meat you get out of them is so miniscule anyway, but yes, he would try anything. Again, it's just like the artwork. Not every piece is a masterpiece. He always said that, just keep making art. Same thing. Keep cooking. It's not all going to be winners.

Oh god, one funny story, he called me and he said, "Sweets. Come on over to the house." I'm like okay. So I go up in the kitchen, and this was later in his life, and I think people as they get older, everybody goes this way, but it was like don't want to throw anything out. And if you've talked with anybody else that was with him day-to-day about his kitchen, it was like, "There's nothing wrong with that. Don't throw it out." And you're like, "Bob, it's growing." So, true story, I go, "Yes, babe, what's up? What do you need?" And he hands me this Tupperware container and he says, "Grow these." I opened the lid and it was yellow beefsteak tomatoes that had been sliced, but they'd probably been in there for three and a half weeks? I don't know.

Because they had sprouted. So there's twenty little tomato sprouts in there. "Grow these, Matt."  
I'm like, "Sure."

So I got these big clay pots and I put them down by his herb garden. I always kept herbs and roses growing for him, for the cooking and then for the beauty, obviously, of the roses. And I planted these beefsteak tomatoes. These things grew like nobody's business, like Jack and the beanstalk. I think at one time I had eleven bushes, but they were probably 3 1/2, 4 feet tall. We had beefsteak tomatoes forever and he was shipping a box to his mother and shipping a box to Janet and some to Christopher [Rauschenberg] and dah, dah, dah. So tomatoes—I don't know if you know anything about plants, but these tomatoes, once they're done, they pretty much start to die and wither and they go away. Well, these things are starting to look really bad and I think I pulled one out and he was coming to go to work and he saw me pull it out and he's like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "They're done." "You don't know if they're done! Trim them back." So I trimmed them back. Those darn things produced tomatoes again. They rebloomed—I'm like I've never heard of this.

And asking people about that, because when he'd want me to grow these things, I'd ask people, not knowing how things grow out here in Florida—I'm an Ohio boy. Everything grows up there in the good months. And they said, "You can't grow tomatoes out there." Well, we did. Same thing with roses, "Oh, your roses won't survive." We had roses for fifteen years. Every color of the spectrum. I always loved to surprise him with flowers that I'd found out and about on the property. We have these big crinum lilies. He'd be on the phone with somebody and he'd walk

in, he's like, "Oh my god, Matt just brought in the most beautiful bouquet of flowers," and he just had passion for everything, passion for this place.

On that note, the 22 acres that we have here, as I said earlier, surround South Seas Plantation. I don't know if anybody's talked about how he acquired the properties or why he came? I said to Bob, "How did you get this beautified?" Because he knew my story and I told him about when I pulled off U.S. 41 the first day and there was a guy sweeping the driveway of a gas station and he had a .32 caliber pistol on his hip. I go, "Not in Kansas anymore, Toto." He laughed about that. He said, "Yes, it was still a cowboy town down here." All the way into the eighties. It was surprising. Very Southern.

So the property. He was working—and this is what I heard from [Donald] Don Saff and Bob—that he had been in St. Pete [St. Petersburg, Florida] working on a piece called Dante's *Inferno* [*Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*, 1958–60]. He just fell in love—you've probably never been to St. Pete—but it has an old Florida charm to it. A lot of retirees—all of Florida does—cottages and just very quaint—if that's the right word—but kind of old school. Life was slower and I think he'd been in New York for so long. He really loved that and I think it probably reminded him of Port Arthur because he and his mom—they used to fish every other day. They would fish for food. So they said well—I can't remember who it was that told him—Ann Brady, our director, was telling me that she had talked to someone about it, that they had suggested Sanibel [Island]/Captiva, you should go check this island out.

He said to me, they come down, get on the island, and they had to stop the car because a turtle was crossing the road. He just thought that was so cool. Coming from New York City, hello. So Bob gets onto Captiva and is there, walking around. He said he got ensconced with a swarm of butterflies and he said that was it. He literally bought the Beach House that week [1968]. That was his first purchase, which is right on the Gulf of Mexico, a little two-bedroom place.

Actually, it's a three-bedroom place and it had a downstairs that he enclosed that became his first studio in Florida. Just literally from day one—again, very similar to me—came over the bridge, knew that this is probably the place I want to be. It's just absolutely fantastic.



Rauschenberg's Beach House, Captiva, Florida, ca. 1971. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Robert Petersen

Then he bought the property behind him because it had a larger building and he added onto it and built that into a more proper studio, but when I started here, that was still the studio. Everything was still over there. It was amazing upstairs, like this linoleum floor, the entire center of the space was all tables with these art supplies around the outside. Now I never saw them do this, but he used to roller skate around the table when he was looking at the art. Some of the old photos show him standing on the tables making work and out on the beach. He did the *Cardboard* series

[1971–72] on the beach using Captiva sand. He did matte medium and then painted the backs of these boxes, just spectacular. [Note: describing *Early Egyptian* series, 1973–74]



Rauschenberg and studio assistant adhering sand to *Early Egyptian* series (1973–74) on the beach, Captiva, Florida, ca. 1973. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni



Rauschenberg working on *Grand Slam (Galvanic Suite)* (1990) in his Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1990. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

So really diving right into using what was around here. Kind of going back to the Combines [1954–64]. And found Garden Street recycling [Garden Street Iron and Metal] in Fort Myers [Florida] which was great for going picking. Some of the old pictures of him with that Suburban with metal sticking out of the side and stuff tied on the roof, with him and Lawrence and Darryl going to get all these found objects. I think he was in heaven for many reasons. In New York, he'd walk around the streets. Obviously, here you had to go to town to get this stuff. Then he bought the jungle portion and, again, this was the first real piece that bordered South Seas and I think that he was concerned about these condos, that it would just all be developed, this spectacular, pristine island would be just completely developed. When he bought the jungle



portion—these all started in the seventies, buying these pieces of property. The jungle portion, had he not bought it, today would have twenty-eight homes in it, maybe more. The unique thing about the road that's through there—he had two Volkswagens, This and That. He drove This through the jungle and wherever he made it through the jungle—have you been through that road yet back there?



Rauschenberg returning to his studio in his Volkswagen Bug convertible after a run to the Gulf Iron and Metal Junkyard, a source of materials for his *Kabal American Zephyr* series, Captiva, Florida, 1982. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Yes.

Hall: Wherever he drove it through the jungle, that became Jungle Road. All the buildings have names, so the first one was the Beach House. The second one became the old studio only because the new studio that we're in now was built. Before, it was just the studio. So you have the jungle. And then the next two pieces that he had bought—the print house and the curator house—the print house is unique because in 1978 [late 1970] he started a company called Untitled Press, Inc. That's where he had old printing presses in there, two of them. He had Janis Joplin [Little Janis] and Grasshopper. He named the one Janis Joplin because they grew up in the

same town: Port Arthur, Texas. And then the curator house, which is the one that was built in the twenties, that's where they stored all the prints. So those two.

But the unique thing was, there was an artist here on Captiva—her name was Maybelle Stamper and she was a recluse. She was from New York City. I used to mow the grass for her every once in a while and she was really an amazing artist. But she was one of the first people that—the way Bob acquired these last few pieces of property was, there were older people living on the island who loved, cherished their privacy. Well, the island was starting to be, unfortunately, was being discovered by tourists. They pay our taxes now, but— He would approach these people and say, “Name your price. I don't ever want to develop the property and you can stay here until the day you die.” So that was ideal and Maybelle actually—she passed away in her cottage. That's what she wanted. And that was a unique cottage. It was a Sears and Roebuck cottage that was actually brought over on the barge. She was amazing. In her house after she passed, on the walls would be like, “Walked the beach in 1954 with three cats and found beach glass,” and she was naked and there was nobody here. So imagine the island back then. So that I thought was so cool and so unique.



Maybelle Stamper, ca. 1979. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

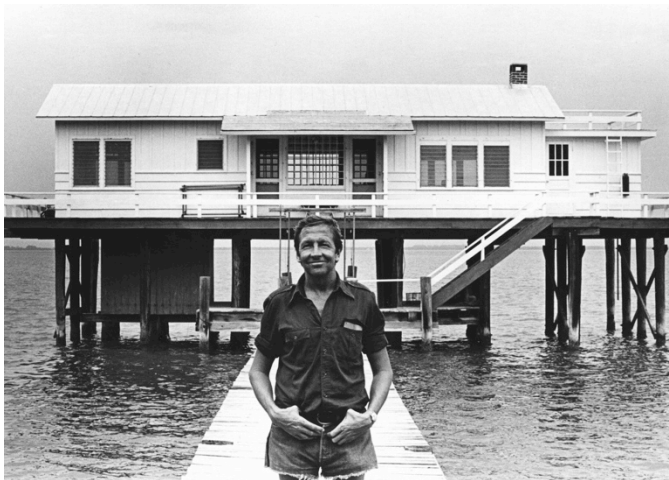
And then he'd cross over the road, Captiva Drive, and he bought these 5 acres that we're sitting on, which has the new studio now, the Bay House, and then the Fish House, the famous Ding Darling Fish House. Have you been out there yet?

Q: Yes.

Hall: That's fantastic. Very unique story there, it was built by [Jay Norwood] Ding Darling in 1942 and J. N. Ding Darling is an amazing conservationist. To me it's so cool that they never met, but they were so like-minded in what they were doing. My research on Ding Darling was, he was predicting our reliance on oil and how water would be a commodity. In the twenties, he was thinking about this stuff. So a pretty amazing forward thinker, like Bob. They were so similar that way. And then it was bought by the Van Vleck family and then Bob bought it from them. So this portion here is so fantastic because of that correlation with Ding Darling and just this last year we did get the historical designation on it. I think Bob was against that at first

because someone had told him he would have to open it up to the public once a year. I kept trying to tell him it's not true. I found the statute. I showed it to him. "No, I don't want to open it up to the public."

So I hope he doesn't come back to haunt me on that one because, "We didn't have to open it up to the public, boss." It's going to be historic. The main thing is, if it gets damaged in a hurricane, we can rebuild it. And that is really such a special place. He used to go out there with the drawbridge and take the five dogs, six dogs out there. If the drawbridge was up, he didn't mess with them. So that was his meditation place. Some people would call it his muse. It wasn't his muse. I think it was just his quiet place and we maintain that today as a residency now. Nobody really stays there. They go out and do sunrise yoga or they want to write or whatever the case may be. So that place is very special.



Rauschenberg in front of the Fish House, Captiva, Florida, 1979. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Terry Van Brunt

Then the field, which is adjacent to us, there were two people he acquired the property from and they used it until the day they died. So I just think that was so forward thinking and so generous, which hardly describes Bob. Generosity is not even a big enough word for how generous he was.

So now this 22 acres completely surrounds South Seas. They cannot get any bigger. Then fast-forward now to this artist residency which, to me, has been just so amazing to be a part of. I talk about Bob. People ask me about Bob. Just relaying the stories and how special a man he was in my life, my family's life, and it's so cool that the artists that are here say, "Oh man. I feel him." We've had people say they've seen him.

Q: Oh really?

Hall: Oh yes. Oh yes. The karma—his karma, I think, transcends any life, physical life force. The night of his memorial, I'll never forget, because I'm not a big believer in that afterlife kind of stuff. I figure you live your life right and when you go, you go. So the night of his memorial—and I'll finish with this because I think it's appropriate—we had probably a hundred people here, staff and especially me with my sous-chef and that experience, we tried to cook all his favorite food, which was hard to do because it's so massive. There was no bird's nest soup, by the way. I'm like I'm not even going to mess with that. I marinated filet for three days and Janet sent crawfish etouffee. I just tried to think of everything—pumpkin soup, we made. Bob had given us aprons years ago and the caveat with that is that you can only take an apron home if you send a picture of yourself cooking in it. This was not to be a piece of artwork to sell or hang on the wall. So, of course, I did surf and turf with no clothes on. He thought that was cute.



Robert Rauschenberg  
 Untitled [apron], 1997  
 Screenprint on cotton apron  
 35 x 39 inches (88.9 x 99.1 cm)  
 Collection of Matt Hall

But anyways, I wore his apron that day and I had a bandana. It was a long day of cooking. And I'll never forget because they were running late. People were talking and food was getting cold and I was like, "Bob, this would drive you crazy." He said, "Oh, don't worry about it." In my mind, I'm thinking, "Don't worry about it. It'll still be good." So everybody eats and the stories start, which is just great. Obviously you want to celebrate his life, but it was very, very sad. He passed away in this building and I was fortunate enough to be here that night and say goodbye to him. Actually, I didn't say goodbye. I don't say goodbye. I said, "See ya."

So anyways, the night progresses and now it's dark and it's starting to wind down and I walked over to the Waldo shed and I'm sitting there. I had my cry and I'm like what next? What am I supposed to be doing now? This blue thing appeared in my vision and my hair stands up on my neck, I'm freaked out. So I come jogging back over here. And I was by the pool and I'm standing down here by the pool and I'm looking at the pool. Wow, that freaked me out. What the hell was that? As I'm sitting there looking at the pool, a bobcat jumps up on the wall, on the inside of the wall, and there's fifty people up here. Doors are open. It's noisy. Bobcat walks across the wall,

stops, and looks right at me. And I said, “Okay. I get it. Get to work.” And that’s what he told us the last night. He said, “Get to work.” So that’s what I’m doing and I’m so blessed and thankful, and I miss him.

Q: Yes.

Hall: Any questions?

Q: Yes. You’ve given me lots to ask. Lots to think about and lots to ask about.

Hall: Okay.

Q: I want to start with some of the things that you touched upon. You said that he told you about his early life. What did he tell you about growing up in Port Arthur?

Hall: He said that the smell was horrible. He said that he didn’t have the best relationship with his father. Now Janet tells me different. He loved the fishing part of it. His dad was a hunter. He wasn’t an avid hunter, he didn’t want to go shoot things, but he loved to fish. In fact when he got here, he’d fish at the beach every day. And when it was snook season, which is a fish that we eat down here—it’s fantastic—he would say, “Sweets, is it snook season?” I’d go, “Yes.” He goes, “Well, you know what you’re doing today.” So literally that’s what I would have to do because he was working. So I’d go catch fish. I just think those things about it—he loved the times with his mother. I don’t know if anybody’s told you, but he wanted to be a preacher at first. Very

religious, going to church and those kinds of things. I think that ultimately he wished he'd had a better relationship with his father when he was young. That's just from our discussions. But yes. It wasn't this horrible childhood and these traumatic kinds of things, but he said it wasn't easy. It was not an easy life and I think it was, again in my opinion, why he has been—and still gives. Bob is a gift that keeps on giving. I think that had a lot to do with it, as far as his generosity.



Rauschenberg boating with his parents Ernest and Dora Rauschenberg on the bayou near Port Arthur, Texas, fall ca. 1927. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Did his mom come out here much?

Hall: His mom did come here. I think while I was here, at least—I want to say three times. Could be wrong, but that sounds about right. Funniest story was—she had some kind of—I believe it was surgery or something and she was upstairs at the Gulf House and I happened to be in the kitchen and you heard this voice—because we had the doors open in case she needed anything and you heard this voice go, “Milton!” And Bob just cringed because that was his real name—Milton. So I always laughed at that because not many people get Bob to cringe. But she was a sweetheart. She kept him on his toes. She was still Mom, as all moms do and should.



And I love the story, I don't know if Janet told you about it—about when she used his artwork? Yes, so you've heard that story. Her using his artwork as shutters on a house and Bob got there and said, "But Mom, you didn't turn them out so the art is facing out." "Milton, I don't want the neighbors to know what you do." I just laughed my butt off at that. I thought it was so hilarious and he said it with a laugh. He just knew how his mom was.



Dora Rauschenberg with her “storm shutters” made from Rauschenberg’s early paintings, Lafayette, Louisiana, ca. August 1992. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York. Photo: Philip Gould

Q: You were talking about when you first came out to Captiva and you would walk by his place and you just knew that that's where the artist guy lived. What had you heard about him before you actually met?

Hall: Well, I did hear—and he had a float too and you'd see him out there floating. Bob was so tan. That American Indian or whatever his heritage—he was just this tan god. But I did hear that you did not want to put your towels down right in front of his house, that he was very protective of his space. He owned that beach and it is by law you own from the high tide line up. Well there wasn't hardly any beach so as it got busier here, I do remember hearing about him out there barking at people to get off his property. He was not always—from the people that didn't know

him out here, the nicest guy, but hey, he was protecting what was his. That's about one of the only things that I remember.

But having said that and waiting on him in the restaurants, which I had done a couple times at the fine diners, Greenhouse restaurant [Greenhouse Grill, Sanibel Island] where I also worked—amazing tipper. Always remembered your name. So as far as that goes, people loved when Bob came in. Servers, chefs, because he was so passionate about food, as we discussed. In fact a little side caveat to that was whenever we would go to openings with him, it'd be time for him to do his speech or give his presentation and whoever, the gallery director would be trying to grab stuff, like where is he? Where is he? I knew where he was. He would be at the farthest satellite bar talking to the bartender. He was having a drink. So what? But he was engaged with the bartender, "Where you from? What's your name?" And they didn't know he was the star of the show. That's how down to earth Bob was.

Q: You mentioned traveling to New York to go to the big retrospective opening. What other openings did you attend?

Hall: Well, I did a de-install for him in—what is it—MASS MoCA [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams]. He wasn't there for that, but I did go up and do that. I also did some installations for him in Ohio. I was usually the guy here watching the property, so didn't get to go to as many openings of his, but I had been to Miami, had driven him to some openings over there. Especially when he got older and needed the wheelchair. I'm a pretty strong guy and I knew how to ambulate him, how to get him in and out of vehicles. So then I would attend more

openings with him to assist the nurses, getting him in and out of the cars. That was always an experience, the paparazzi and the whole nine yards.

Side story—really funny story. The last trip Bob took to Europe—it happened to be Darryl Pottorf’s show and it was in Valencia, Spain. Bob also had a show at the Edison [Community College]—it’s now Florida SouthWestern [State] College here in Fort Myers, coming up to this Valencia show. I was at the house and Bob said, “Sweets,” he goes, “can you go with me to that opening?” And I’m like, “Well, sure.” He said, “Well, talk to Janine [Boardman],” who was the head nurse at the time, “Talk to Janine about the menu going over and coming back.” I’m like we’re going to Fort Myers. I’m like, “Okay.” So I called Janine and she goes, “Well, on the flight over,” I go, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on a second. Flight to where?” She goes, “We’re going to Valencia, Spain for Darryl’s opening.” I’m like what? I thought we were going to Fort Myers. So I called my wife and said, “Hey, Bob wants me to go to Valencia, Spain.” “Well, you’re going.” I’m like, “Well, I just want to check.” So that was amazing. It was just—when I told him the story, he’s just laughing. He goes, “You dummy.” I go, “Well, you said the opening. You didn’t say which opening.” So we went to the Fort Myers opening and then traveled with him to Valencia, Spain in a Gulfstream V and that whole experience was amazing.

Q: Tell me about that trip.

Hall: We flew out of Fort Myers and it was so fantastic because [Dr.] John [B.] Fenning, John and [Frances C.] Fran Fenning—I don’t know if you’re doing an oral history with her, but she would be someone they should definitely suggest, Fran Fenning. John passed away this year.

John was a surgeon. Served in 'Nam. He was instrumental in doing hip replacements, knees, that kind of thing. He actually, for lack of a better term, in my opinion, our opinion, staff, probably saved Bob's life one time. When Bob first had his fall in New York City on his hip, he crushed his hip. It just pulverized. He was at Beth Israel Hospital and when he came to and was cognizant, said, "Get me out of here," because I think Andy Warhol died there and I believe some other people died there and he was really superstitious about that. So we med-flighted him down. He was at the hospital here in Fort Myers and John Fenning came out and was doing the surgery to repair his hip and said, "Guys, if we don't operate, he's definitely going to die. If we operate, he could." He had bloated up and it was just all these other issues. And of course Bob pulls through the surgery and bounced back and started making art. The guy had more lives than a cat.

But John and Fran Fenning were able to go with us, which was fantastic. So now we've got a doctor on board. We had two nurses and myself flew in this plane. Oh my gosh. Sushi on the way over and cocktails and it was my first time in a private—I've done a lot of flying, my dad has an air show business, I've been upside down in a lot of airplanes more than I've been upright. But anyway, flying over there like that, in style, was just fantastic. The best story about the opening was there was a Julio González award that Bob was going to present to an artist. Obviously it was Darryl's show, but Bob's coming. There were big events for him. I pulled nurse shift one night to give the nurses a break so we had gone to dinner in a hotel and it was just Bob and me in the hotel room. He said, "Sweets," he goes, "let's have a glass of wine." I'm like, "Okay." So we have a glass of wine and he goes, "Let's look through this book of this artist."

So we're looking through this book and I'm being quiet because I want him to concentrate.

Finally about twenty minutes into it he looks at me and he goes, "Well, what do you think?" I go, "Really?" He goes, "Yes." That always blew me away. Even when I was working with him here in the studio, he'd ask you what you thought about the piece. I came to recognize his style, his things that he did like and not like, and I was very honest. If I weren't honest, he wouldn't have me here. That was the whole thing. He wanted you to say. So anyways, I said about this artist, I said, "Oh. It kind of all looks the same." He goes, "Exactly!" Slams the book. "Give me another glass of wine!" It was just that realism about him and that truism about him that I always thought was just so cool.

The opening was fantastic. Flight back was great, but that was his last trip to Europe. I remember talking to him about that. He loved Valencia. He loved Italy. He loved travel. I think that was the realization for him at the end—was not being able to travel anymore and I think that really was a no deal for him.

Q: How did things change around here as his health declined?

Hall: Obviously for us, it was very depressing, but when he first had that experience and was in a wheelchair, we had some pieces underneath the Bay House. They were from the *Dylaby* [1962] series that he had done and they'd been here for years under a plastic tarp. We thought if we could help bring the pieces up into the studio and put them out on a tarp so he would come over, because his depression was huge. He didn't know if he was going to be able to paint again, so we

modified tables. Lawrence designed a table that could be tilted if he needed it. We just were positive, encouraging.



*Dylaby relic, cart with wheels with crushed metal attachment, from Rauschenberg's installation for Dylaby at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1962). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*

I think the first thing he did was a print and as he had the stroke, then he started losing the use of his right arm. That was another whole issue. “Am I ever going to be able to even—” Because he was doing the transfer process then, which was a very physical act of transferring the image onto the panel. Literally his trust in us to start assisting him in doing that, which I’m sure was very, very difficult for him, but I think the confidence of all the years we’d been here, knowing—he was right there on you too. He was standing right there and how you trimmed out the image and how it was laid down and how it was transferred—you’d get a quick little whack with his good hand if you did it wrong. He was very serious that it was assisting, but you’re really his hands. He was like—it’s his work. He’s doing it. You just happen to be the mechanism that he was using. That was very different. It was very pressured. On yourself, not from him, but just trying to do things right because oh my god—you’re making a Rauschenberg with the man.

And on that note too, I think for us, as staff, when we installed anywhere, people would just—the conservators and the installers, they would freak out—you could just see them cringe, the way we handled the art. To us it's an everyday thing. To them it's a two-million-dollar piece of artwork. To us it was like—we'd flip it around, set it on our foot, ba boom. Hang the brackets. Hang. Go to the next one. Measure, hang, go. We'd change out the studio in an hour's time. They'd go to lunch. We'd re-hang the entire building. I think that people were like, "Oh my god, who are these guys?" That kind of thing. But yes.

Q: I heard that you would sometimes drive work up to New York.

Hall: Oh yes.

Q: Can you tell me about some of those trips?

Hall: Oh my gosh. Well, I did seventeen trips with no tickets and no accidents. I think really the one that sticks out with me and which was very difficult in a lot of ways was six weeks after 9/11 [September 11, 2001]. We had to bring a bunch of work up there, myself and Mark Pace. We're in this white box truck with no stickers, no nothing on it, full of Rauschenbergs. We got stopped multiple times. We got stopped at [New] Jersey and the guy almost didn't let us proceed because we didn't have all the right physicals and, "Where'd you stay last night?" and dah, dah, dah. So when we finally made it to New York and Bob was wheelchaired, he had just had—I can't remember which one it was—it might have been the stroke. I believe it was. So when we got

there, we made it safe and sound, which was amazing in itself, but just the difference in the city.

Were you there?

Q: I was actually, yes.

Hall: The smell, the sounds, it was like battery acid and flesh, and the quietness. For me it was just so surreal. I can't even imagine living there and being there throughout it. The thing for us was then, Bob and Darryl asked Mark and me to go around and photograph because Bob wanted to do something. He wanted to—whatever the case may be—for victims and the whole nine yards, but obviously he couldn't go around and photograph. So Mark and I went around the entire day photographing Saint Michael's [Church] and the hospitals with all the "have you seen this person?" missing signs, oh my god. By 2:30, three o'clock, we—Mark and I—were just, we were done. We were emotional wrecks. We went to a place down in the financial district to get a cocktail and the guy said this place would have been packed. So that was just so, so, so weird and so hard and so difficult. Went to dinner with Bob that night and the photos were—you can't say he loved the photos. I hated the photos, but they were what he needed. So that was big for me. That was trying to be his eyes, trying to see what he would photograph.

We, as staff, you never left without a camera. He'd be like, "When are you coming back? You got your camera?" Those were the two questions. Every once in a while, he'd say, "Did you have a good time?" but he missed you. He wanted you here. But I'd be in the middle of England photographing manhole covers and pieces of junk and people are like, "What the hell is wrong with this guy?"



But getting back to the trips to New York, yes. It was always kind of ironic—I'd always drive a big Penske truck. I'd always stay at Super 8 or whatever hotels and you'd go in and have dinner and what are you guys hauling? We're hauling furniture. We've got thirty-two million dollars in the back. Especially after Bob's passing. That to me was again surreal because you're not taking it up there. It wasn't for a show. This was kind of the end thing and that was difficult. Yes, it was very difficult. Yes. Did a lot of runs and a lot of driving. A lot of hours. A lot of interesting close calls on the road, but I think the karma of Bob was looking out for us so I never had any issues. But yes, I did a lot of truck runs.

Q: Did he do anything with those photos? The—

Hall: Oh yes, oh yes. I can't really identify which piece—but yes, they did—they used some that were of the Twin Towers that we reprinted and did some other different stuff, but yes. He did a huge piece and I think [Thomas] Tom and Lydia West own it now. But it was unbelievable. It was of the firehouses. That was one of the things he did use a lot. I think that was very difficult for him, the first responders. Obviously everybody that died in it, it was very difficult for him, but these guys running into a building that you know is going to collapse just was huge for him. In fact Twenty-first Precinct, which is right around the corner from his building in Lafayette Street, I know we wheeled over there and he was in tears. Shaking guys' hands. They lost eight guys, I think, from their thing. And then friends of Bob, they live over by Gramercy Park, their son was a fireman. He lost his roommate. A lot of those things that hit really close to home for

everybody, obviously, but he was—he was pretty pissed off about that whole thing. That’s the best way to say it. Yes.



Robert Rauschenberg  
Cover for *Time* magazine, September 11  
commemorative issue, 2002  
10 1/2 x 8 inches (26.7 x 20.3 cm)

Q: You talked earlier about recognizing an image from the library here. One thing that I wanted to ask you about was—I would think that if I had a close relationship with an artist, I would be looking at that art, looking for them in a way. I’m wondering if you can talk about how you saw him in his work and how you recognized his life in this place.

Hall: Oh wow, that’s a good one. When I see different series—again, I started in ’93 and Bob passed away in 2008, so there was *Off Kilter* [*Keys* series, 1993–94], there was [*Synopsis*] *Shuffle* [1999]. All these series and pieces that pop into your head and remembering that day. For instance, the one that has never been seen, actually I think the Menil [Collection, Houston] owns it now. Bob was commissioned to do a piece for a Renzo Piano building in Italy and it was going to be a—not a monastery [Padre Pio Pilgrimage Church, San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy]. My

brain. Anyways, the design was that Bob had to—he was going to tell the story of the Bible from his eyes, like Michelangelo. [Note: *The Happy Apocalypse*, 1999] Bob studied the Bible. Again, he wanted to be a preacher. But, so he's dyslexic. It took him—I remember three weeks when the Bible was always on the counter and he's— I'll never forget one day. He comes over and I came in. "How you doing?" "I'm doing shitty!" I go, "Whoa, what's up? What's going on?" I'm thinking something's wrong with the property. He goes, "Have you read this?" And he holds the Bible to me and I go, "Well, what I'm supposed to have read as a kid, growing up a good Lutheran." He said, "It's mean to women. It's mean to animals." Just on and on and on.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*The Happy Apocalypse* [original artwork for Padre Pio Liturgical Hall], 1999  
 Inkjet pigment transfer, acrylic, and graphite on polylaminate  
 96 x 250 1/16 x 2 inches (243.8 x 635.2 x 5.1 cm)  
 The Menil Collection, Houston  
 Gift of the artist in memory of Walter Hopps

Bob was breaking it down into—instead of as a whole, as we study the Bible, Bob was really breaking it down because he had to get that grasp on it, because he's going to tell the story on this huge piece. This wall in this building was going to slide so you could accommodate big people and it was supposed to be translucent so you could see through it. So Bob—we did a mockup, a maquette of it on the wall and started doing transfers. I remember helping him do a

rose transfer because it was a picture of one of our roses we were growing here that we were putting on there. Had this big satellite in the middle of it. He just struggled and it was—the hardest—I think that’s probably why he rarely did commissioned pieces, just because it was having to kowtow or be under someone else’s supervision, if you will.

I will never forget because we sent it off and they sent it back. Now this is the Vatican. They sent it back. They didn’t like his interpretation of the Bible. You want to talk about an artist P.O.’d and throwing things and how dare they and did Michelangelo have to redo the Sistine Chapel [ceiling, 1508–12] and just this—so it never took—it never came to fruition. The piece was fantastic. Fire and brimstone, lamb—it had—anybody who’s even looked at the Bible at all, Old, New Testament, I don’t care what it is. You’d go, “Oh yes.” If you said this is one man’s interpretation of the Bible, you’d be like, “Oh yes. I get it.”

Q: What did it look like?

Hall: Well, the centerpiece of it was a— I can’t remember why we had— Or maybe we bought it. I think he had Lawrence buy it and it was a satellite TV, but it was one of those big ones. That was the centerpiece and that was basically everybody’s prayers going up to God, was his interpretation of that. From the beginning, it had, like I said, flames and fire, and there was a lamb, and it just goes on and on in these images. It was big. It was probably 25 feet wide by 12 feet tall and that was just our maquette of it. So I think the overall piece was going to be something like 70-by-40 feet and then it was going to slide and move. I know he really struggled with that. That was just a very difficult—he was a grump. He was just a grumpy person for three

weeks. He's reading the Bible. I'm like I got you Bob because I was always one of those kids in church questioning, like, "Wait a minute. God did what?" And the preacher's saying, "You just have to have faith." I'm like, "I don't get it." We had talks about that. Bob and I had a lot of talks about that. Is it a god? Is it a positive force? The way I am is, live your life positive every day. Treat people the way you want to be treated. If that's not God's way, then I don't know what is. It's pretty simple. I don't think you have to bring in all this other stuff and Bob was the same way. That's how he felt. So we had a lot of correlation with that, so it was kind of great. Yes.

Q: You spoke about being in the studio and sometimes you'd be having all these conversations, whether it was about religion or food or—and then that seemed to lead sometimes to a moment of quiet. And then he would say, "Okay, let's work."

Hall: He never said that. He wouldn't have to. You just knew.

Q: Right. Okay. I'm wondering if you can just talk a little bit about whether there seemed to be a natural order of things when he was in that mode.

Hall: Like his process? I can attest to the fact that there were times when—the routines tended to be similar. He'd get over here about three o'clock, 2:30, three o'clock. His routine in the morning was get up, have his healthy breakfast. Always had a nice, healthy breakfast. Taking all of his vitamins and things of that nature, and his double espresso. My god, he'd have a triple, double espresso. I'd be climbing the wall and it was getting him kick-started. Always watched *The Young and the Restless*. He always had—that was his routine in the morning. Then he'd get

over here to work. Now once he got over here—and he would usually give us a heads up, “I want to do a 5-by-5.” It just depended on what series we were working on. But having said that, it wasn’t like—there were days of him struggling with a piece, where he just couldn’t get past a certain point and just would be a bear. There weren’t all these great conversations about politics and that. The TV was on. Maybe a couple words here and there, but he’d just be—you could just see him, the side of his eye, just staring at it. It’s like damn it, why can’t I get past this? Why can’t I get past this? So there’d be a day when he might do two pieces and they’re fantastic. And then there were days—but he’d always, at the end—and how do you finish a piece? I see that now with artists we have as residents. When is a piece done? Especially when you’re doing what he was doing, with the collage and that. So that struggle, that inner struggle was very evident in the way he walked, talked, looked. You could just sense it, that he was struggling. You could sense it when he was really rocking and rolling and things were great. So that was always something I think that everybody was just attuned to. When you think about all the personalities that were here, I think everybody was a pretty sensitive personality. I don’t know if that gravitation is natural because Bob was or what, but that was always kind of interesting, that everybody kind of had that feeling, that sense. But it was just amazing. It just didn’t matter what he was working on.

And like I said before, when he’s asking the gardener, “What do you think?” I would say, “That one’s a little strong up there,” like when you’re looking at a piece, my eye was being drawn to this image, whether it was because of the color or the imagery of it. That was an honest assessment and he took it to heart. You’d see him maybe come back—well, he wouldn’t do it right then in front of you because you’d be right. But you might come in the next day and you’d

see it'd be muted. He might have muted it out a little bit or he added something. There was never like, "Hey, thanks for that." It was just that he needed that outward input. It could have been a guy off the street. He probably would have asked him the same thing. It was something to help him get over that stumbling block, if you will. That's what I feel. I don't know if that was what he thought, but that's why I'd be blatantly honest. "It's not my favorite one." I'd be honest about that. He'd go, "Yes, yes." And he said the thing about when he was working, you just keep working. They're not all going to be masterpieces. But the idea is to keep working, keep working. Because out of that something's going to come that's going to be really good.

He'd always have his little sayings like, "You don't want to use every cornflake in the box." Just these Bob-isms, if you will, that were always kind of popping out, half—and I'm mad at myself because I really should have written more of them down because I forget most of them. But he just—he was a one-liner guy. He was one of those—and I had said that to him one time because I'm pretty quick that way with the comedy. Laughing—the two of us were always like—we'd always be cracking up and making jokes about—it didn't matter what it was. Whether it was on TV or somebody in the room. You had to be prepared because you were going to get cut down at the knees. I said to him one time, I said, "You remind me of one of my favorite comedic directors." He said, "Who?" I said, "Mel Brooks." He goes, "Brooksie!" He says, "Oh, we used to go hook up at parties," and dah, dah, dah. He said, "He'd set them up, I'd knock them down." I said, "I can just so see it," that Mel Brooks kind of boom, boom, boom sense of humor.

Q: Are there any other Bob-isms that you do remember?

Hall: I knew you were going to—I should have never brought it up because I'm trying to think of some.

Q: If you don't, no problem.

Hall: I don't right now, but if I think of them, I'll shoot you some. That was always one of the ones. "Don't use every cornflake in the box." Yes. I'll think about that one. They'll come to me.

Q: Okay. I want to talk a little bit more about some of the gatherings here. You mentioned that there was an annual Christmas party?

Hall: Yes, it was kind of impromptu. It was—yes. I guess it was, it was annual for quite a few years while I was here. At the end, not so much. I think because of his health declining. But yes. And it usually was just staff, but if Dorothy and Roy were here—it was always the people that were—Kat Epple. Fantastic. She was always here. Staff, family was all invited. Bob was so sweet that way. He'd give the kids—my kids each, as they got older, like a thousand dollars every year for college. He just was so generous. Or a little piece of artwork or something. What I always remember was—the cooking was always great because we'd all be throwing stuff together—but the Christmas trees were always the interesting thing.

One year, back here in the bay, on the backside here, Pine Island Sound, this huge blue—it was bright blue anchor rope and it was probably off a tugboat. It was probably about 2 inches in circumference. There was probably about 20-some feet of this blue rope washed up and I found



it and of course, found objects, hello. So I brought it up and Bob goes, “Oh, it’s beautiful.” He didn’t use it for—he just kind of put it aside. Right before one of our Christmas breaks comes along, he goes, “Hey sweets! Is that blue rope still around?” I go, “Yes, I got it over in the shed.” He goes, “Bring it over here.” So I bring it over to the house. “Get the ladder.” Okay, I get the ladder. “Hang it from the ceiling.” Hang it from the ceiling. “There’s our Christmas tree!” One year, I think he had one of the neon bikes that Lawrence and him had just finished. That was our Christmas tree one year. It was just—it was never traditional Christmases with Bob.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Bicycloid II*, 1992  
 Bicycle with neon light and aluminum base  
 90 3/4 x 72 1/2 x 24 1/4 inches (230.5 x 184.2  
 x 61.6 cm)  
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Holidays, to him, pretty much were just another day. He was very cognizant of it obviously, knowing what day it was, but it wasn’t like, “Oh my god, it’s Thanksgiving.” It was just another day. He was always very generous that way, okay, yes, “It’s Thanksgiving. You’re going to be with your family. See you tomorrow though, right?” It was kind of like, “Okay, you can have your holiday, but get back to work.” That was always the thing. Like I said, even when he left for vacations, it was always that way.

Yes and you never knew who was going to come at Christmas. It could have been a collector or somebody who happened to be here, but it was always staff. It was always—if we have Christopher come and all that, but that was always really sweet. That was always really cool because we didn't do that a lot. It was more like we're working. Bob was—you have to realize—if you've looked at the body of work, it is immense. Just looking at it makes me tired. The retrospective book alone is bigger than a Webster's dictionary. When I started here, '93—I only probably had—what was it, five years where his health was really good and he had a couple other issues through those years. But even in that time, how much he was making, work-wise, was just mind-boggling. Keeping seven of us just nonstop. Container truck in or truck coming in or collectors coming in. His work ethic has just always amazed me.

Q: It really blew my mind when I went to the warehouse. Just that it's just his work. It was endless.

Hall: Right.

Q: It's incredible.

Hall: Yes. And until we had put that—I had been over to the old one and that was three floors, which was different. Okay, it's a floor and you go, "All right." But to see it like it is now at Mount Vernon [New York] is just mind-blowing. And they're incredible. But again it's like—I don't know. Not my favorite. Some of them are like whoa. I've had people—Bob was always

very generous about—“Hey Bob, can I give someone a tour?” Family or a really good friend and of course half of my—say, “I don’t get it. How much is that worth?” That kind of thing.

But one story that I loved about him and he just loved this young man—my good friend Eric Vartdahl, who has unfortunately passed on now. Lou Gehrig’s disease at forty-six years old. He had a very autistic son. Little E, Eric Junior. He was an avid fisherman and we have mullet here that are fantastic smoked, so Eric said, “Hey, you think Bob would let me come up there and catch mullet? I’m going to bring Little Eric with me.” Bob’s like, “Sure, bring him up.” I said, “Bob, Little E’s autistic.” He goes, “Really?” He goes, “Well, when they’re out there, you should bring them up in the studio.” I’m like, “Okay.” Because he was working, I didn’t want to interrupt Bob working. So we brought Little Eric up and he’d never had a conversation with his parents. He was pretty autistic, severely autistic. So he comes in. Little Eric’s bouncing around and he’s patting himself and hitting himself and flipping his fingers like autistic children do. Bob’s like, “Hi Little Eric!” and dah, dah, dah. Of course he kind of sees Bob. Looks at the wall and sees Bob’s work and just stops. Still. He just starts walking towards the work and his dad obviously was trying to be respectful of Bob and he says, “I’m sorry.” And Bob was like, “No, no, go ahead.”

So Little Eric walks over to this—and I can’t remember what—I think it was *Off Kilter* series maybe we were doing at the time. No, it was *Scenarios* [2002–06] that were big. They were the big ones. And Little E walked up to it and his eyes just got huge. Then he turned, bent over, and looked at them upside down and just started going crazy looking at them. So he’d go to the next one. He’d go up to it, he’d turn, he’d bend over, and he’d look at it upside down. And Bob just

started cackling. He goes, “That’s what I need to do! I need to turn them all upside down!” Just that kind of generosity and that passion. As they were leaving, he said to Eric, “You bring him back anytime.” That to me still is just mind-blowing. And the Lab School [of Washington, D.C.] that he has with disabled teachers [note: a school for students with learning differences]. Bob with his dyslexia. Just took him forever to read. We had all these books. The library is all over these houses now. It never ceased to amaze me how successful he was with that ailment. Not an ailment. Whatever you call it. Setback, I guess.

Q: Sure. So you’ve said that you were always honest with Bob about whether—not my favorite or—so which, what is your favorite? What of the work do you really love?

Hall: I definitely love the early Combines. There are so many different series that I’m very interested in. The *Cardboard* series. I had actually taken my wife and kids with me. It was at the Menil [*Robert Rauschenberg: Cardboards and Related Pieces*, 2007] and I had never—I had only seen them in books. We had one or two here, but they were always wrapped up so I had never seen them installed. To see those installed—I think it maybe had a lot that was personal to it because you could tell—you’d see the little shells that you knew were from Captiva, which was cool, but then he used that paint in the back of them. They’re lighting the front of it and it looked like neon in the back [note: characteristic of some works from the *Early Egyptian* series]. So, for lack of a better term, the tricks that he used. I don’t like that word. I don’t know how to say it. How he made objects different from what they were. I’ve always taken that to heart in the way that I view things. Because I had asked him one time, I said, “Found objects.” He said, “Imagine the story this thing has lived. Imagine what that bucket has been through.”



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg: Cardboards and Related Pieces*, The Menil Collection, Houston, 2007. Works pictured: *Rosalie / Red Cheek / Temporary Letter / Stock (Cardboard)*, *Glass / Channel / Via Panama (Cardboard)*, and *Canary Stick (Cardboard)* (all 1971)



Robert Rauschenberg  
 Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), 1973  
 Cardboard, sand, Day-Glo paint,  
 wood, fabric, and fabric belt  
 54 1/4 x 35 x 78 inches (137.8 x  
 88.9 x 198.1 cm)  
 Hess Art Collection, Switzerland

I remember we were up at the foundry—oh, that’s one of my favorites too. We were at the foundry, and [Richard Alan] Rick Frignoca, god rest his soul, who did *The Ancient Incident* [*Kabal American Zephyr*] series [1981–2006]—those were definitely some of my favorites because I worked on them. I just think they were so beautiful. He had these buckets that he would use in the casting and they were just rusted and they had been—because the guys would throw them. So the bottoms had these dents to them and they just had this real, real cool character. Lawrence had brought one back—or Bob went up there. Bob saw them. He’s like, “Oh my god. Those buckets.” And Rick’s like, “You can have them.” So he took six [seven] of those and we did this mirrored base and set these—just these rusted, bent buckets on this thing and it just was so beautiful. Again how many pounds of sand, how many sculptures did those make? Because that’s what they were using, it was this bronze foundry and all they did was art and all they did was sculpture. So think about that. I think that bucket probably had been used for a

thousand pieces of artwork. So that whole thing about his philosophy I think is my favorite. I would never want to say, “Oh, that one’s my ultimate favorite.”



Robert Rauschenberg  
*The Ancient Incident (Kabal American Zephyr)*, 1981–2006  
Patinated cast bronze  
86 1/2 x 91 x 20 7/8 inches (219.7 x 231.1 x 53 cm)  
From an edition of 6 produced by Bronzart Foundry, Sarasota, Florida

Robert Rauschenberg  
*Watchdog*, 2007  
Rusted metal buckets on mirrored aluminum composite base  
13 x 96 x 14 inches (33 x 243.8 x 35.6 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Q: Sure.

Hall: I think just that process, and the way he thought about things, is my favorite. I guess that’s the best way to say it.

Q: Do you look at art differently now?

Hall: Oh absolutely. I look at everything differently.

Q: Yes?

Hall: Oh, I'll be just around town or whatever and see something like, "Oh! That's a Bob." I'll use that term a lot. "Oh, that's a Bob." But certainly in working with multiple artists now—we've had over a hundred artists through here now [Rauschenberg Residency]. That was very difficult for me, by the way, at first. It was knowing Bob's rhythm, knowing Bob's way that he worked, and then having to deal with eleven people at one time, trying to learn their nuances and be as sensitive to them as I was to Bob, knowing when they want, if they want to chat or if they need help or those kinds of things. And I certainly wouldn't be, if I'm good at it—I think I'm okay—they've kept me here this long, but having worked with Bob has trained me to be able to do that. But I absolutely look at things differently, look at their work differently.

Because of my training with Bob, it's very hard not to suggest certain things because I want to protect his processes and the way he did things. I don't know if maybe that's doing him so much service because I think he might, deep down, there's times when I let little things slip because I think he'd be okay with it. I'll always be protective of him until the day I die, but I think there are certain things that were so cool that—these are things that they would be able to figure out on their own. This is not a copyright thing or a patent or anything like that. But just something, if it can help them get to that next level or, as I say it now and I've coined the phrase here, "give them an art-gasm." That's my new thing with the residents. We try to give art-gasms. People kind of look at me a little weird, but it makes sense because you see that smile when they get to that point or something happens, it's like, "Oh my god. It's amazing!" So that I would say yes, I definitely look at things differently because of him.

Q: What—and you can answer this however you want—what did you learn from him?

Hall: I think what I learned from him was passion for everyone and everything. I think that I've always been one of those to stop and help an old lady across the road. That's how I was raised. I think that has been instilled since a very young age, but even more so now. Everybody, no matter how wealthy, how poor, has value. They are important. I think that I've always had passion about animals and plants. I think we shared that. Is it enhanced? Absolutely. Ever since his passing, my passion for this place, every day— Just when I think I can't care any more or try any harder, I do. Like one time he said to me, "Matt, you walk in the room and you're upset, everybody knows it." So I've tried to be better at that. Because what I've realized is that artists, especially artists, are so hypersensitive to nuances, to just if I'm upset or something's bothering me—because we're creating an environment here that we want to create, that Bob had. But there are outside influences. There are budgets now. Before, it was like, "You need it? Get it." So there are other influences on my job that sometimes can hinder that. I've always tried to protect that. Just like if Bob was here. We're here to work and just be cognizant of that. Because he said that, "You wear your emotions on your sleeve." So I work on that every day. It's hard to change when you're fifty.

Q: Can you speak a little bit more about how you view your role here now with these different artists who come in?



Hall: For me, being asked to stay on—and I feel that it certainly had a lot to do with my knowledge of the property itself, all the buildings, the nuances, the things—I think it’s always developing. I’m actually now—and the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation is awesome about, if I want to enhance my education. So, for instance, next month I’m actually going to a two-day silkscreen seminar. So enhancing the skills that I learned a little bit with Bob, to me, is very important, to be able to assist these artists. Because that’s what we do. We assist them. So I think if anything, that changing role. As far as the property goes, that hasn’t really changed much. These are all my babies so I’m very cognizant of that and I’m very worried if something’s broken that I—it’s hard to prioritize now because that’s ultimately my job. But when the artists are here, they’re my job. So that’s what’s changed. Before, it was Bob’s working. He had multiple assistants so it wasn’t like I had to be there. Now, when the artists are here, that role changes. So it’s like you switch a gear. You’re in artist assistant mode. Then you switch a gear and I go back to property management. So I think that’s pretty much what’s changed, if anything.

How I approach my job every day really hasn’t changed much other than, as I said, about the emotional thing. My passion for this place just grows every day. I’ll come in here days and I have tunnel vision. I’m focused on, “I’ve got to do this.” The “gottas” I call it. “I’ve got to get this done.” And then there are days when I still walk in here after twenty-one years now and I go, “My god, look at this place! Look how freaking awesome this place is.” And I thank Bob. There’s a chair here on the property that we installed the first birthday, the first year after Bob died, on his birthday, that is out by the beach, that staff installed. It was one of *The Ancient Incident* chairs, rejects that didn’t make the grade. Every year on his birthday, on October 22,

you can watch the sunset and it faces the sunset. Periodically I will go out to that chair and talk to the boss. So that keeps me grounded because I do ask him questions. He doesn't always answer. But I think I know what he would answer. Yes. Not really much changed, other than I miss him so much, every day.

Q: Yes.

Hall: So I'm just trying to be a good steward. Because the last thing he told me the night he died was, "Take care of the place." That's what I'm going to do until they're done with me. But if they put Internet at the Fish House, I'm out of here. I told them, I said—

Q: If they what?

Hall: Put Internet at the Fish House.

Q: Oh, okay.

Hall: Then that's it. I'm done. I will fight that one. They'll be like over my dead body. I'll be lying out there on the dock. Because I feel that there are certain things that should be protected and I think that Bob would wholeheartedly agree with that one.

Q: All right. I just have two more questions.

Hall: Okay.

Q: One of them, I think, is going back a little bit. Were you around when Rocky laid eggs?

Hall: I was around when Rocky laid eggs.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

Hall: I was definitely around when Rocky laid eggs. I remember getting the phone call. It was like what? Because I had been up there—I'd go up there for New Year's Eve sometimes and take friends and stay because everybody would leave. So I said, "Boss, you mind if I go stay at 381 for New Year's Eve?" He's like, "Great. Somebody will be in the building and somebody can take care of Rocky." So then [Matthew] Matt McGee wouldn't have to stop by and do it. Oh my god, I loved that turtle. It was so amazing. You'd get on the elevator and there was a sign: "Watch Out for Rocky." And you'd get to the second [third] floor in the kitchen and that damn turtle would be right there at the elevator and just hearing her sound going across, boom, boom. You would scratch her shell and as you scratched her shell, she would stand up and extend her neck. We would always stop at the produce place and bring her home strawberries and dog food. She loved ALPO or whatever. Lettuce. And you had these chopsticks they had made and you'd feed her and she was the coolest turtle.

So then we get the call. Rocky laid an egg. We're like, "What?" And Bob just had this big old smile on his face like, "Okay. So here's what we're going to do. Send them down. Send—how

many? How many you got? Two? Send them down. I want them gold-leafed.” I want them this, I want them that. It was just the coolest thing. But then the sad part was the [American] Museum of Natural History [New York] comes in and, “Oh my god, you guys are feeding this turtle this,” and, “You should be giving it this turtle food.” From what I understand—someone can correct me—but I think that she was one of the last of her species. They had talked about that, because we had talked about, “Well, can we get the egg? Can we have a little Rocky? Can we have baby Rocky?” Something about not being able to fertilize them or she was too old. And that’s what ended up killing her, an egg was lodged inside, from what I understand. And that was very sad. But that was just too funny. I just remember Bob, not only was he blown away by it, but it was a new art project. What can I do with these eggs?



Rauschenberg’s turtle Rocky, with her eggs, in his Lafayette Street studio, New York, August 2006

Rocky was so important in the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange [1984–91]. I asked him about turtles one time and I’ll never forget—I guess he did a show and I need to do the research on it and find out which one it is because I’ll never forget this story. He said, “Well, John and Merce and I—” I think it was in Texas. I keep wanting to gravitate back towards that. It was in Texas and they were going to do this performance and they were trying to figure out

lighting. Bob usually did the lighting and the costumes. I think he had said that they passed this pet store and it had all these turtles. It was Texas. It was gopher tortoise or whatever they were. So Bob got this ding, ding, ding. Light bulb goes off. He goes and buys every turtle in three towns and straps a flashlight on their back and that was the lighting for the show [note: referring to Rauschenberg's *Spring Training*, 1965; premiered in New York]. I'm like who the heck thinks of this stuff, number one. But then I was thinking about how cool it would be with that slow light turning as they're doing this performance. Just blew me away.



Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg performing *Spring Training* (1965), First New York Theater Rally, former CBS Studio, Broadway and Eighty-first Street, May 1965. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Loewenstein Novick

That's how Rocky got a ride home. He kept one of them and lived in New York City and Ileana Sonnabend's chair in the corner. That's where Rocky would hang out, by the chair that Ileana gave him. Chewing on drywall. "Oh my god, Rocky, come on. Let's get you something to eat." You'd go in to use the bathroom and Rocky's sitting there next to you while you're going to the bathroom. I'll never forget going up there for—I think it would have been a cocktail party or whatever at Lafayette because I did go to a couple openings up there. You'd always have—there'd be 110 people. That turtle never got stepped on. You'd turn around, "Oh, hi Rocky."

Here's this turtle. It just never ceases to amaze me. Bob. "Oh, you can take care of Rocky."

"Yep, took care of Rocky." "How's she doing?" "She's doing great."

Q: Anybody in particular that you really enjoyed meeting through Bob?

Hall: Definitely a couple. Lily Tomlin I absolutely thought was just so cool. Meryl Streep, bar none. Meryl Streep—in fact when we took the—was it that one or was it a different one? I don't think that was the 2000 one. Mark and I took a piece up there and Meryl had come down and did the ACT [Abuse Counseling and Treatment, Fort Myers] auction for Bob. So genuine.

Remembered your name.



Rauschenberg with Lily Tomlin (right) and others, 2002



Rauschenberg and Meryl Streep, 2005. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 2005

Interested and engaged when they're talking to you. There've been people here like yes, okay.

Yes, you're the gardener. Whatever. So anyways, we go to her place in Chelsea and knock on the

door and Meryl comes to the door, “Oh, hi Matt!” Kiss on the cheek. So we’re installing this piece for her and she had this beautiful antique wood credenza thing and the piece was going above it and she goes, “I want it up there.” I said, “Well, let me get Mark and move this thing.” She says, “Oh no. You can get up on it.” I’m like, “Meryl!” Work boots on and so I get up there and I’m measuring blocks and she’s asking, “How are your kids? You have two, a boy and a girl, Jonathan and Megan, how’s Jonathan and Megan?” I’m like oh my god, Meryl Streep’s asking me this. I’m hanging the piece and she goes, “My god, your boots! I love your boots. Where’d you get them?” I go, “Oh, my daughter picked them out at Kmart for me.” She was just so cool that way. Then, at the end, she says, “What are you guys doing tonight?” We said well, we’re probably just going to go down to Chinatown a little early and get something to eat. She says, “Well, I’m producing an off-Broadway play called *bridge and tunnel* [2004].” She goes, “Would you guys like to be my guests?” We’re like, “Oh my god. Sure, of course!” So it was will call. Well Matt McGee was working late that night. I said, “Well, let me call her and see if we can get a third one.” She goes, “Sure, no problem!” Amazing play. Dustin Hoffman goes walking by. I forget the congresswoman from Texas that Bob loved, with the silver hair.

Q: Ann?

Hall: Yes, yes, yes. Amazing.

Q: Richards?

Hall: [Dorothy] Ann [Willis] Richards. I think that's right. Bob loved her. She goes. So it was just amazing and the performance was fantastic. Next day, my cell phone rings. Meryl Streep. "Hi, Matt. It's Meryl." Holy crap! "How was it?" "It was fantastic! Thank you!" Just very genuine and sweet.

Lily Tomlin was so interested in the plants and the flora and fauna around here and the animals. Jane [Wagner], her partner—I reached out to them because they were doing a project about elephants that is fantastic. If you've never seen it, I highly recommend it. Soon as I saw it, I wrote a check. A hundred dollars is all I could afford, but it was just fantastic. So I would have to say those two. Yes, really stood out.

Q: Okay. My last question—

Hall: Uh-oh.

Q: No, no, it's not so serious. This is a collection of stories. So I'm just wondering if Bob was still here to share a story to be part of this collection, what story you think he might want to share?

Hall: That is a very difficult one. I don't know. I don't know if it would be his time at Black Mountain [College, North Carolina], which I think formed so much of how he thought about his art. I would think that would have to be up there. Probably the birth of Christopher and his time with Susan ["Sue" Weil]. But, I know, just thinking back about the Black Mountain one, I'll



never forget because Josef Albers—Bob was in a sculpture class or something and they were working on something, and Bob did this imitation of Josef and said he came in and looked around at everybody's piece, wearing this shock and horror on his face. "I do not want to know who did this one!" Of course, it was Bob's.

But then driving the car over the *White Paintings* [note: referring to *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) created in collaboration with Cage] and I would think that would probably be—I would think if I had to guess—that's a really tough question to ask because I'm not him. But I just know that that was so important to him and the connections made there with John and Merce and the people who were there in that time and that whole philosophy of what that was. I would have to guess—that's probably my best guess. I've heard it said here a little bit about our residency that it's like Black Mountain because we share meals and that. In my opinion, I'm not the biggest fan of that analogy because there is only one Black Mountain. I would like Rauschenberg, Robert Rauschenberg Residency to be Robert Rauschenberg Residency. Does it have some influence from Black Mountain? Probably. But it's so different. The atmosphere, the time. Artists were going there to learn versus coming here to create. Very similar, but not the same. So that's kind of what I would have to suggest on that.

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

Hall: I can't think of it.

Q: Okay.

Hall: It's been great.

Q: All right, thank you so much.

Hall: Oh, my pleasure. My pleasure.

Q: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]