

## RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

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Robert Rauschenberg Photographs, 1981

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG  
JANUARY 9, 1981 AT CAPTIVA ISLAND, FLORIDA  
BY ALAIN SAYAG

Q. WHY DON'T YOU LIKE PERFECT PHOTOGRAPHY?

A. IF BY PERFECT PHOTOGRAPHY ONE MEANS MAXIMUM OF CONTRAST, LIGHT AND DARKS AND EXTREME FOCUS, THEN I DON'T NECESSARILY DESIRE A PERFECT PHOTOGRAPH. JUST LIKE IN ALL OTHER ART FORMS, THE OBJECT ITSELF IS DICTATING YOUR POSSIBILITIES. SOMETIMES YOU MAKE ALL THE RIGHT DECISIONS, AND SOMETIMES YOU CAN ONLY BE EITHER RIGHT OR VERY WRONG, AND SOMETIMES THE WRONG MAKES JUST AS INTERESTING A PHOTOGRAPH AS BEING RIGHT. BUT YOU ALWAYS ARE DEALING IN COLLABORATION WITH THE AMOUNT OF LIGHT YOU HAVE, THE SCALE OF THE OBJECTS, YOUR OWN PHYSICALITY--LIKE YOUR SIZE AND THE DISTANCE BETWEEN YOU AND THE IDEAL PHOTOGRAPH--AND EVERYTHING IS MOVING. SO I AM MORE OR LESS CHOKED WHEN I GET SOMETHING THAT APPEARS TO BE TECHNICALLY A GOOD PHOTOGRAPH BECAUSE IT IS NOT NECESSARILY MY INTENTION. ONE GETS AS MUCH INFORMATION AS A WITNESS OF ACTIVITY FROM A FLEETING GLANCE, LIKE A QUICK LOOK, SOMETIMES IN MOTION, AS ONE DOES STARING AT THE SUBJECT. BECAUSE EVEN IF YOU REMAIN STATIONARY YOUR MIND WANDERS, AND IT'S THAT KIND OF ACTIVITY THAT I WOULD LIKE TO GET INTO THE PHOTOGRAPH--A CONFIRMATION OF THE FACT THAT EVERYTHING IS MOVING .

Q. THEN PERFECT PHOTOGRAPHY IS ONLY A TECHNIQUE, OR DO YOU TRY IN ALL YOUR WORK TO GO FURTHER THAN THE TECHNIQUE?

A. IF YOU ALWAYS HAVE A PERFECT NEGATIVE YOU WILL NOT HAVE ANY EXPERIENCE IN THE DARKROOM EXCEPT FABRICATION AND I CONSIDER THE TIME IN THE DARKROOM A VERY SPECIAL KIND OF TIME THAT CAN'T BE CLOCKED. WHEN I AM IN THE DARKROOM I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I HAVE BEEN THERE FOR TEN MINUTES OR SIX HOURS. IT'S ONE OF THE ONLY PLACES WHERE TIME ONLY EXISTS FROM ACCOMPLISHMENT TO ACCOMPLISHMENT, BECAUSE THERE IS NO OTHER FORM OF REFERENCE IN THE DARKROOM. YOU CAN'T BRING THE TELEVISION AND THE DOOR SHOULD BE LOCKED, SO IT'S A KIND OF CLOISTER WHERE YOU ARE PERFORMING AN OPERATION THAT TAKES TIME. THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE MEDIUM IS TIME, BUT YOU ACTUALLY HAVE TO SACRIFICE THE OUTSIDE WORLD TIME IN ORDER TO MEASURE THE DARKROOM TIME.

Q. YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS ARE ALL FULL FRAME. DO YOU EVER CROP YOUR IMAGES?

A. I DON'T CROP. PHOTOGRAPHY IS LIKE DIAMOND CUTTING. IF YOU MISS YOU MISS. THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE WITH PAINTING. IF YOU DON'T CUT YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT THE WHOLE IMAGE. YOU WAIT UNTIL LIFE IS IN THE FRAME, THEN YOU HAVE THE PERMISSION TO CLICK. I LIKE THE ADVENTURE OF WAITING UNTIL THE WHOLE FRAME IS FULL.

Q. YOU DON'T MISS VERY OFTEN, FROM LOOKING AT THE CONTACT SHEETS.

A. IT'S BECAUSE I WAIT, I WAIT UNTIL IT'S THERE AGAIN. WHATEVER IS THERE IS A TRUTH, BUT A TRUTH YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN. WHAT YOU SEE IN FRONT OF YOU IS A FACT. YOU CLICK WHEN YOU BELIEVE IT'S THE TRUTH. THE INFORMATION IS WAITING TO BECOME IN ESSENCE A CONCENTRATION, CONCENTRATED SO CLEARLY THAT IS CAN BE PROJECTED BACK INTO REAL LIFE, INTO YOUR RECOGNITION. IT COULD BE ANY SIZE.

Q. YOU SAID TIME SPENT IN THE DARKROOM IS A SPECIAL KIND OF TIME THAT CAN'T BE CLOCKED. WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL?

A. IT'S YOUR FINAL CONTACT WITH AN EXPERIENCE THAT YOU HAD OUTSIDE THE DARKROOM. IT'S SORT OF YOUR CONTRACT WITH THAT EXPERIENCE. SOMETIMES I HAVE TAKEN PHOTOGRAPHS AND JUST FELT SO EXCITED THAT I COULD BARELY HOLD THE CAMERA STEADY, AND THE PHOTO WAS BORING. SO IT'S THE FINAL CONTRACT, VERIFICATION OF THE AUTHENTICNESS, THE TRUTHNESS THAT HAS BEGUN WHEN YOU SAW AN IMAGE AND DECIDED TO PHOTOGRAPH.

Q. WHEN I LOOK THROUGH THE CONTACT SHEETS THERE IS NOT A LOT OF DIFFERENCE AMONG THEM. ARE YOUR SELECTIONS MADE ONLY ON THE BASIS OF SIZE AND QUALITY AND THE FINAL IMAGE?

A. RIGHT, BUT IF THERE IS INCONSISTANCY, THEN I RE-EVALUATE THE AESTHETIC OF HOW IMPORTANT IS THE TECHNICAL. ACTUALLY, WITH

THE NEW CAMERAS, IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO MAKE TOO MANY MISTAKES. THE TECHNOLOGY BUILT INTO THE CAMERA INSISTS THAT YOU DO THINGS RIGHT WHETHER YOU WANT TO OR NOT. IT WOULD ALMOST TAKE A GENIUS TO BYPASS THE ELECTRONICS THAT ARE FORCED ONTO THE CAMERA AND THEREFORE THE ART. PERFECTION IS STATIC, AND A FLOW CONTINUES THE CURRENT. SO PERFECTION IS NOT ONE OF THE GOALS BECAUSE IT'S A DEAD END.

Q, DOES THAT MEAN THAT PERFECTION IS DEATH AND INSTEAD, YOU WANT TO RECREATE AT LEAST A SENSATION?

A, THE EYE THAT LOOKS FOR PERFECTION IS THE ONE THAT IS ANTICIPATING A CONTROLLED RETIREMENT (NO MATTER WHAT THE AGE). SO WITH THE PHOTO. THE PHOTO CAN INSIST ON REVIEWING MOMENTS THAT WERE UNSEEN, OR NOT KNOW THERE WERE SEEN BUT PASSED IN VIEWING. JOHN CAGE SAID (I DON'T KNOW IF THEY WERE HIS OWN REMARKS OR ZEN) HIS GOAL WAS NOT TO GET SOMEWHERE, HE JUST WANTED TO ENJOY THE TRIP. THAT'S THE QUALITY I WANT IN ALL OF MY WORK, THAT A SPECIFIC GOAL OR ACCOMPLISHMENT WOULD BE ALLIED TO THE FACT. I NOTICED A LONG TIME AGE, WHEN I WENT TO A STRANGE COUNTRY, THAT I HAD THE BEST TIME AND THE GREATEST EXPERIENCES WHEN I THOUGHT I WAS LOST, BECAUSE WHEN YOU ARE LOST YOU LOOK SO MUCH HARDER.

Q, WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE IMAGE YOU FIND AND THE IMAGE YOU MAKE? IS THERE ANY DIFFERENCE IN YOUR MIND?

A, NO, ACTUALLY TAKING THE PHOTO ACCOMPLISHES SEVERAL THINGS.

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ONE, IT FORCES ME TO BE IN DIRECT CONTACT, INTIMATELY, UNPROTECTED, IN AN AMBIGUOUS OUTSIDE WORLD AND THEREFORE IMPROVE MY SIGHT. ALSO, IT GIVES ME A STOCKPILE OF BOTH EXPERIENCES AND LITERAL IMAGES TO DRAW ON FOR OTHER SPECIFIC WORKS. SO IT'S THE EXPERIENCE OF TAKING THE PHOTOGRAPH THAT KEEPS MY MIND OPEN TO UNPROGRAMMED IMAGES, UNCONTROLLED, AND THEN PERMITS ME TO HANDLE THEM RAWLY OR ALLOW THEM TO BE DIGESTED IN A CACOPHONY OF OTHER SPECIFICS.

Q. FOR A LONG TIME YOU DIDN'T INCLUDE MANY OF YOUR OWN IMAGES IN YOUR WORK. WHY?

A. UNTIL RECENTLY I HAVE USED MY OWN PHOTO IMAGERY IN PAINTINGS, LITHOGRAPHS AND ENGRAVINGS ONLY OCCASIONALLY. I DESIGNED A DANCE SET FOR TRISHA BROWN AND CO. THAT REQUIRED SEVERAL HUNDRED UNIQUE PHOTOGRAPHS. IN ORDER FOR ME TO EDIT AND SELECT THAT MANY IMAGES REQUIRED ME TO TAKE APPROXIMATELY A THOUSAND NEW PHOTOGRAPHS IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME, AND I BECAME ADDICTED AGAIN. IT HAS HEIGHTENED MY DESIRE TO LOOK, THE CONSTANT SURVEY OF CHANGING LIGHT AND SHADOWS SHARPENS ALL OF THE AWARENESSES NECESSARY NOT ONLY TO MAKE PHOTOGRAPHS BUT FUNCTIONS AS FERTILIZER TO PROMOTE GROWTH AND CHANGE IN ANY ARTISTIC PROJECT. HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON SAID SHYLY THAT HE ONLY USED HIS CAMERA AS AN EXCUSE TO SEE THE WORLD.

Q. WAS IT IN THIS SPIRIT THAT YOU MADE THE PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIP ALONG THE EAST COAST LAST FALL, OR WAS THAT SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO DO LONG AGO?

A. IT WAS SEVERAL CIRCUMSTANCES. ONE, I HAD BOUGHT AN ANTIQUE CAR, A 1936 PHAETON FORD. IT WAS IN THE NORTH AND I HAD TO MOVE IT TO THE SOUTH. AND KNOWING ABOUT OUR PARIS SHOW I WANTED TO HAVE AS FULL A PALLETTE OF CHOICES TO SELECT WORKS FROM FOR THE EXHIBITION AS POSSIBLE, SO I SPENT NEARLY A MONTH TRAVELING FROM LONG ISLAND TO CAPTIVA ISLAND. MOST DAYS TERRY VAN BRUNT, MY WORK ASSISTANT, AND I DIDN'T TRAVEL MORE THAN FORTY MILES. THE CAR BEING OPEN AFFORDED ME MAXIMUM VISIBILITY. ONE NEVERTHELESS CAN'T SEE IN ALL THE ALLEYS AND LOCAL CRACKS. BEING ON FOOT WAS THE NATURAL ALTERNATIVE. FOR SO MANY YEARS SPEED WAS ESSENTIAL. JET FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER AND YOU DON'T HAVE THE TRIP. THERE IS NO IN BETWEEN, MERELY ONE URBAN AIRPORT AND ANOTHER URBAN AIRPORT. EARLIER I TOOK A TRIP WITH TERRY WHEN HE BOUGHT A 1940 CHEVROLET. THAT WAS A THREE-WEEK TRIP THROUGH THE MIDWEST. IT FELT AESTHETICALLY HEALTHY TO DO THAT. I CONFRONTED MYSELF AND A ROUTE-BOUND PUBLIC NEWLY, OBSERVING AND RESISTING AND RE-EVALUATING MY REGIONAL PREJUDICES, AND SAW FOR THE FIRST TIME ALL OF THE CHANGES AND SIMILARITIES THAT EXIST. I HAVE NOT DONE THE WEST COAST YET, BUT THIS IS ALMOST AKIN TO THE ORIGINAL IDEA THAT MADE ME GIVE UP PHOTOGRAPHY WHEN I WAS STUDYING WITH ALBERS. I WAS SERIOUS ENOUGH OR

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DEDICATED ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT I COULD NOT HAVE AT THAT POINT TWO PRIMARY PROFESSIONS. MY PROJECT FOR CONTINUING, IF I WAS GOING TO BE A PHOTOGRAPHER, AT THAT TIME WAS TO PHOTOGRAPH THE ENTIRE U.S.A., INCH BY INCH. I WAS SERIOUS AND THOUGHT "IF I START I WILL HAVE TO FINISH IT, SO MAYBE I'LL STAY WITH PAINTING ONLY." I HAD EVERYTHING TO LEARN IN EITHER OR BOTH, BUT NOW I FIND THEY ARE THE SAME THING. MY WORK HAS ALWAYS BEEN JOURNALISTIC, EVEN THE MOST ABSTRACT PAINTINGS, THE MOST NON-IMAGE WORKS ACQUIRE A PRESENCE DUE TO A LACK OF LITERAL REFERENCE AND IN SOME CASES THE AGRESSIVE ABSENCE OF INTERNAL INFORMATION. THE ALL-WHITE PAINTINGS WERE ACTIVE BECAUSE AN IMAGE OF LIGHT AND SHADOW WAS ALWAYS CHANGING. IT'S YOUR LIGHT AND YOUR SHADOW.

I AM ALWAYS AFRAID OF EXPLAINING WHAT I AM DOING, BECAUSE MY MIND WORKS SO PERVERSELY. IF I KNOW WHY I AM DOING SOMETHING IT IMMEDIATELY GOES TO ANOTHER CHANNEL AND I TRY NOT TO DO THAT ANYMORE. SO IN ANY INTERVIEW THERE IS A POSSIBILITY THAT I HAVE TO LEAVE THE INTERVIEW AND CHANGE MY ENTIRE LIFE. I THINK I'LL STOP NOW AND LET THE WORKS ANSWER THE QUESTIONS. TOO MUCH INFORMATION IS AN OBSTACLE TO SEEING. MY WORKS ARE CREATED TO BE SEEN.

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