

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Shistrote, Barbara / Interview with Robert Rauschenberg / National Public Radio, 1983; and Winship, Fred / Interview with Robert Rauschenberg / UPI, 1983

Tape #4

A/National Public Radio Interview, Jan. 4, 1983
Castelli Gallery basement, Barbara Shistrote

B/ Jan. 5. Fred Winship, UPI

Side A - National Public Radio Interview, Jan. 4, 1983

BS: ... Now the whole thing is ...

RR: My favorite thing , something that they've overlooked.

BS: The whole thing is encased in, is it plexiglass?

RR: Yes, but that's all very temporary, unfortunately. We designed Terry van B , my assistant, designed a fantastic modular unit that we could use to show 7-1/2 feet all the way up to 100 foot, or any odd number in between, but we had an impatient carpenter who started on the job before we could get to him. This is all very temporary.

BS: Now, when you went to China, did you know that that's what you were going to do? Had you already planned it?

RR: I knew that was one of the things I was going to do. I had a h there which did not belong to me, and a lens that looked like, I don't know the measure, but it looked like a mortar of some kind, bazooka, and so I was almost a little bit afraid of even taking pictures in a land that you're not supposed to take too many pictures with something that looked that dangerous. You know, I was on the right end of it, it was still scary. Didn't know I was a lousy shot.

BS: Did you get into any trouble?

RR: Well, a couple times some citizens thought that, my being a foreigner, I shouldn't maybe taking photographs of what I was, and I got one critical remark. I was photographing a garbage can,

it had some very lovely rotting watermelons in it, and some Chinese came by absolutely outraged, and started screaming, "You're wasting the film. You're wasting the film!" Now I don't know if he thought I was wasting the film because it had no smell (laugh); that certainly was one of the outstanding colors of the shot that I was making at that moment. But, you know, when you do something, I mean I do it in my paintings, too, where I don't want to show some edited version of my limited responses, you know, to the world. I mean, it's part of my objectivity to show the world itself, and you know, you have to spend time, I mean the world is obviously not that beautiful. And it only gets beautiful if you can adjust to it in all of its own uniqueness. And so, my pieces tend to have to include nearly everything that I can see, and it's almost beside the point whether I like it or not. I mean, definitely I've got some, you know, particular points of view, some prejudices, but I fight them as hard as I can.

BS: How long were you there?

RR: I was 5 weeks, which is a long time to be anyplace as exotic and as tense as that. It's 5 years of absolute minute-to-minute programmed activity. Even if it was your program, they would give you the permission to live your own life, and you know, I didn't go over there not to succeed. I told one journalist, you know, it's one thing to go to New Jersey to fail, but it's quite something else to go all the way to China to make an ass of yourself.

: But what would that have amounted to, I mean, to fail in China?

RR: I think that if somehow if they had gotten more involved politically, say, with the content of my work, not just the photograph, because I think everybody believes a photograph, no matter how abstract it gets, they know it's a something, and the something is real, tangible, and cannot not be lying or it wouldn't exist. But, when you start taking childish posters that they usually use only for New Years to redecorate their house--that's what the is for the works, the paper works there, and that was the real purpose that I was there, to work in the world's oldest paper mill. And then you start taking wedding fe s, and just cutting the most highly embroidered sections out into little circles, and if they've really gotten into that before, you know, before they could see what a wall is going to look like, then I think I could have been into some serious trouble. I think I might have embarrassed them, because most of the artwork there is still very traditional, even the best of it is very ...

: They have no concept of modern art as we know it.

RR: They are just getting into that, actually it couldn't have been a better time politically for me to be there because they are just now rebuilding their whole structure from the revolution, and it was really almost, I think, part of their reconstruction to accept me and my works.

BS: You were talking about that you wanted to show the world as it is. There was a fellow in this morning who was looking at all the work in the gallery, and he apparently is from China, and

he sounded, he said, superficial. He was concerned that you, an American, had gone over there, spent a few weeks there, 5 weeks, and had brought back different pieces of China, and were essentially saying to us over here, This is China.

RR: Well, it never says it is China. This is my work that was made in China. I'm not that ambitious. And I don't think I'd like to take China on either. But what he might be considering with his training, is that, where are the big bridges? Where's the industry? You know, where's the plants? Where are all the people? Where are the farmers? And, because that's their whole idea of reality through art, and it's been enforced on them.

BS: Because that's their art.

RR: In fact, you can't do abstract photography if you're a photographer there, without getting into trouble.

BS: So really, you would say it may have well to do with what you think of as art, whether or not ...

RR: Well, that has to be. We went to the Chinese Embassy, and I was telling them how the Deputy Minister in China had accepted us, and had seen my work, and I had a book with pieces I'd done in the last 15 years. Now a lot of those things are still unacceptable, you know, like the cardboard pieces. People are just beginning to get used to them now, and I think that may be because I've done something that they like less. Since then, right. And one of the first things, Terry and I went there, and one of the first things that they said, we're at the embassy in Washington, was Well, you know, the Chinese do not

show abstract painting. And so we had to come and tell them the new news, you know, how the country had changed since the last time we spoke to it!

BS: So, what attracted you about China? Why did you want to go there?

RR: Well, I mean, it's definitely an adventure, you know, it's not your normal trip, and I wasn't going over there on a sight-seeing bus, and I was going over there to work, and the challenge romantically was to work in the world's oldest paper mill, and that was in En-Hui Province, and it had never been opened up to foreigners before. So we actually lived just as anybody else does live, little separated from the people as much as they could, but still the town was so small and so curious, and we were getting all of our materials and inspiration right from the streets, so they couldn't separate us too much. They would have had to move all the people out!

BS: Was this where the paper was made that is on this ?

RR: Actually, most people don't know this, but that paper was actually invented in China, because people usually think that the papyrus, which is actually just a bark, was the first paper. It was fantastic being there. It was in such a limited social way to realize that nearly anything you could think of was invented in China.

BS: I wonder whether part of what attracted you to China was the fact that abstract art as yet is not as accepted there as it is finally in this country?

RR: That's certainly an understatement. But it had a lot to do with that. I had wondered for years how they would accept my work, because they could either see it as a catalytic decadent example proving the excessive and the waste of our kind of culture, or they could have another way of disliking it. It could be as excessive and opulent and elaborate as the older art that since the revolution they have denied. Either way I was going to lose, you know. And the most common response was, when they looked at my portfolio, which had over 200 color photographs of paintings and structures, was We can see you're very serious, Well you certainly do work hard.

BS This is a good thing in their society.

RR: Yes, and the other one was, You have a great curiosity about things.

BS: So you ?

RR: I think so, I didn't think that the Deputy Minister would have really said I would really like to see some of your things, and I said, I would love to show them to you. And you says, When? And we made a date. I mean, that's just about as close as you can get to succeeding, isn't it? They can change their mind because our politics right now, they're driving Russia and China right into each other's arms. I don't know what idiots are doing this, but we're doing it. Yes, it's going to happen. That must be about enough!

: Oh, we've just got one more thing.

BS: Well, I brought it. What is it?

RR: Celsius Plantation. It's a from our place in Captiva.

- BS: You know, I don't - you didn't bring this up, did you?
I think I've been carrying that around. Wasn't that the one
I was using this morning?
- RR: What's the look like.
Is this a real tape machine?
- BS: You know, you could go on a piece of art. Okay, let's see,
:
: Rotten, Rose, painter.
: Rotten Rose, Oh, I've met her. Him? No
: He used to have the urban burbs.
: Oh, Robin. Oh, yeah, they broke up. He's a painter. You
moving around, think you could get some ice cubes?
You're not wired in or anything?
- BS: Many people say that they can read meanings in your work, they
could read it like a sentence. Do you think of meanings, are
you thinking of meanings when you're actually putting the work
together?
- RR: Not specifically. I've heard that too, and I think that simply
because I am one of the painters that still believes in, I don't
believe in art as much as I do the value of art in communication.
But I do think that it's a very good vehicle to say things. I've
always tried to avoid limiting that, like I don't do things
because I think that a piece is not supposed to be shocking. One
piece is not supposed to be funny. Sometimes some are more
humorous than others, or more frightening, but that's never the
intention. That's just the physical result of additively of
how they get together.

BS: When you're choosing the materials, are you thinking, Oh this will say this here?

RR: No, actually I work quite negatively. I try to avoid moving to any conclusion, and so that the intention is always a lot more abstract than anybody sees, and more unexpected, if I'm not, but sometimes I said earlier you just can't work, I don't think actually, I was going to do something ridiculous like, again, I was going to say you can't work as 35 years seriously as an artist and not set up some bad habits. But I think actually the truth is you can't work more than about 15 minutes without setting up some bad habits, and in those bad habits can get to be your blindness, you know, rather than your expertise or your effectiveness as a creator.

: Do you get bored? Do you ever get bored?

RR: Rarely. I sometimes get very depressed. But, which is a lot like boredom.

BS: When you're working?

RR: Never when I'm working. Actually I'm quite psychotic about that. Like I would rather than to have these shows, even though I know that we did a really great thing socially for New York for that one evening, it was a really lousy kind of evening, New Year's Eve, and it was just marvelous to see thousands of people looking their best, smiling at each other, and I actually think I tapped probably about 5 generations of people that do not ever see each other too. So I feel very good about the shows, but as far as shows go, I would much prefer to make two or three more than go

to one of my own openings. But I'm working now on this round-the-world tour, and that's a different kind of showing, because it's called the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or Rocky for short, named after my turtle,

BS: That you have now?

RR: Yeah, Rocky is actually Rocky II because Rocky I was a rock that I gave my son when he was about 5 years old because we had that household pet dilemma of the goldfish that would die while the kid wasn't looking, and that alligator, and so forth and so forth, and so finally I just gave him this rock, and he loved it. This was before that foolishness came out about your pet rock, you know.

BS: You could have made a lot of money!

RR: I know, I could have used it then too, I can tell you. And so then I got this turtle that I used for dance piece. I've been doing lighting for you know Maurice Cunningham, Paul T Forber and Avon Raynor, Steve Paxton, and I called the people and things, and when I went to do my own performance, I thought Hell, I'm not going to climb around those old ladders, and so I got thirty turtles and put flashlights on their back and got myself a pair of stilts, and so Rocky is the first turtle, because I didn't know what that was going to look like.

BS: So you performed on stage on stilts?

RR: Well, I couldn't dance. I had to keep figuring out these things so that people couldn't find out that I'd cheated.

BS: Do you get a kick out of shocking people?

RR: I didn't think that was shocking. It was surprising, maybe. There were all kinds of really fantastic things visually that happened that I couldn't have prepared for, and that is that when one turtle hits another with light depending on what the distance is and the angle, you know, it was like dinosaurs crawling all over the walls, making these little turtles look like maybe 6 inches in diameter.

BS: And you hadn't thought of that?

RR: I had only seen it with one turtle, you know. I just wanted to see what the effect would be with one turtle, make sure that it wouldn't hurt the turtle, and see if I got this lighter weight light is possible.

: Do you watch tv?

RR: I keep tv on nearly all the time. It's usually a disappointment. Why? I follow my soaps too. But I just like it, it's just one more window in the house, you know. That's what I was going to tell you about the other Rocky. And that is that I want to go to, I'm planning to go to, starting in China, possibly, unless just gets totally out of the question, and go to Moscow and to Sri Lanka and Athens, then we have 5 places in Australia, and just take shows to places that, in most cases, may never have even seen modern abstract art and certainly not mine. And so like in Sri Lanka so far we haven't been able to find a place. But, you know, I'm taking works that I own of mine that for the last four or five years I've been keeping just for this reason, and like if we have to tie them onto the sides

of elephants and walk them around the park, you know, a couple of times a day. Well, that's show business to me. I mean, in Morocco we had to borrow some bedouin's tent or something. Well, that's show business too. I have to do it soon, though, because I don't know, I'm 57. It takes an awful lot of energy, I felt, because when I came back from China, because I want to have a personal interchange with them and do work there and stuff, and we want to video those countries as we are moving, usually actually the artwork just as a catalyst.

BS: You mean taking pictures of the artwork as, I mean taking pictures of seeing the artwork.

RR: Yes, not just that though, but other things would happen--local music, the way the streets look, how people feel, what they eat, certainly you can imagine, like in China nearly no one would have any idea what Mexico might be like. You know, or any other place practically because travel has been so restricted for so many generations. And so then I found that in, when I was working with experiments in art and technology, that in India the people who had cows know how to make cheese, which is one of the best ways that milk can travel, and so some village is 15 miles away is starving.

BS: Is part of what it is you want to do then, these audiences here in this country have already seen your work, they already maybe have had their eyes opened by your work and a lot of other artists, are you hoping to open the eyes of more people? Is that part of it?

RR: Of course, that's the whole thing. To encourage a kind of individuality and, that's why China was so unusual, because it's almost a deadly sin there, individuality.

: You talk about energy, I mean your output is amazing. And I just wonder, how do you do it, what time do you get up, and when you go at it, and how do you get this much done? Two, are you considered about, you know there's this whole thing in the European-American art market that the more rare something is, the more value they place on it; but your output is so prolific that that doesn't seem to be a concern with you.

RR: I really can't afford for my own sanity, I know what you're saying is true, and I've had dealers who say you know for Christ's sakes, Bob, stop working so much. You're ruining your market. And I've got to do this, I mean you're going to have to do it while you're alive, and I've still got a lot more to do. And that's too banal, vulgar and selfish a thought. I would rather do 50 paintings and be paid for 10 than I would do three paintings and be paid for 50. I mean, it's my and it's built around that, and it's just like the more I do, the more I see there is to be done. So it's sort of vicious that way. What was your other question?

BS: What's your day like? When you're not going out on an exhibit opening.

RR: Well, it hasn't changed since I'm living in Florida. It hasn't changed quite that much because, I don't know, I used to just say as a night person, but I think it's a little more involved in that. I think I have low metabolism in spite of

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the amount of work I do. It's just that I can't get stopped when I get started, you know, but I'm a slow starter. But I think that I'm still oriented to like most businesses, and where you have to get your supplies and the interruptions, usually stop around 5:00, but I'm up and taking care of those things, and you have to be more careful of that when you live in isolation, you know, like on a small island, and so I go to work, used to be just before or just after Walter Cronkite, but now I don't know what time it is. And then I work until about 3:00 in the morning. So it's about 5:00 to 3:00. Sometimes I stop for supper; sometimes I don't. Sometimes I go to bed either empty or on a full stomach. But it's something kind of, much more personal about after sunset or something. That's probably some kind of an emotional thing.

: What about the collaboration in the process, what's happening now with Lorie Anderson and Tricia Brown?

RR: We don't know, and actually either tomorrow or the next day we're going to have whatever it might be, our first business meeting.

BS: You have business meetings?

RR: Well, not usually, but you see Lorie Anderson is business and so Trish and I are still just kind of in the arts, you know. I mean, Trish is not making any money. I make enough, you know. But Lorie is business, and she's got her agents and her promoters and her company, and we don't know what's going to happen. We don't know whether we can really mesh together, or whether

somebody is going to, on some legal technicality, is going to screw up the whole thing. And we ought to find this out before Trish goes around begging for any more grants, you know. And we've got to find out how much it's going to cost somebody.

BS: Do you have any idea what it might be like that you would collaborate on?

RR: Well, I'll tell you, it's one of the, this is one of the most frightening things. This is more scary than going to China. Because those women just eat up the stage, I mean Tricia just eats up that space like crazy, and Lorie Anderson won't stop. I mean, I just wonder if I'm not there to keep them from killing each other. (laugh) And I'm certainly not just going to stand by and let this happen, you know, if I'm involved.

BS: Put some turtles out there with some flashlights on them.

RR: Actually, you're not too far off, because I really don't have any idea yet, but I know it's going to be a live set, I mean literally. I mean I'm going to be choreographing my own set, and I've already asked Lorie if she would be part of it, but I'm not really sure that her yesterday's Yes still might hold out today, and I wouldn't blame her if she wanted to change her mind because art is very fickle.

BS: I would like if we could just start one more reel. How are you for that possibility?

RR: You've got enough, don't you?

BS: It's all relative. I thought I just might ask you sort of a real philosophical .

(laughter, can't hear words)

: Living in isolation, I mean after ...

RR: Well, it's a small island, you know, and I more or less cut myself off. See, this sort of thing I wouldn't say on tape. I more or less, it's mostly retired people, and everybody swears that they too built the Brooklyn Bridge, you know, it's just made out of antique bullshit. You know, everyone going around bragging, and every day they get more important, you know. And well, they have to keep up, and they have no new stories.

BS: Do you use some of them in your work?

RR: No, I stay away from them as far as I can. My closest neighbor called the police the other day just because, I had all my permits and everything. Actually what I'm doing is sound-proofing under the house, the studio that's on pilings. See, I'm right on the beach, so everything has to be on pilings because of law, and actually the stupid fool, I was doing her a favor, you know they can't throw me out, because when they say I'm business, I can say you know that I'm an artist and this is my studio, and I can prove it. But it doesn't matter. I certainly have more trucks coming in and out than anybody else on the island put together, probably, and so it is a delicate kind of balance.

BS: It's interesting being down there, I betcha in a way it's really good for you because you're far away from people who know who you are ...

RR: It is. I go wind surfing (I'm not very good), but I'm adequate.

In the city here I ride a tandem bike. I can't be trusted in traffic, so I sit in back. No, I start looking around, you know?

BS: You probably say Stop, I want to pick that up! Let's just sort of make this brief here. Calvin Tompkins says that you, in much of your work, are looking for the answer for (I'm going to start that differently). Calvin Tompkins says that in much of your work he thinks you are trying to ask the question What is art and what is not. Are you still asking that question?

RR: I don't think so. I know that was a preoccupation right from the very beginning, the all-white paintings were addressed to that, maybe up to the jammers, which were mostly big hunks of brightly colored fabric which was sort of hang over from my trip to India working the Gandhi ashram there, and that was actually one of the places, it was the first time I wasn't embarrassed about beauty. That was a great breakthrough for me.

BS: How did it happen?

RR: Well, I saw beautiful things being dragged in the mud. I saw people who were starving to death who only had one beautiful thing, and the contrast between you know the mud and the flies and the poverty, the silt and the colors, I realized what beauty was for.

BS: You mean, the saris?

RR: Yeah, it's the same thing like in poor countries, why the food gets hotter, because there's less of it, you know, and you feel full faster.

BS: So once you accepted beauty (is that correct?) then you didn't need to ask the question What is art?

RR: No, this is just a by-product of like one of the things that sort of loosened up my whole scan of visions. I think I also stopped thinking about, I mean museums stopped being some kind of ideal, and I saw galleries much more functionally, and my curiosity just shifted into both the fact that one has just so much time, like you were talking about, to do whatever it is that they're going to do, and that my main concern is actually with the world, and I very honestly believe that my round-the-world show, which is a one-to-one contact through art and its communication to all these various countries, has a hell of a lot better chance of at least slowing down the next war, which everyone is pretty sure might be the last one, you know. And I think that there really is no hope in all of the disarmament lies that are going on. We can't continue starving the world while we are building excessive nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon isn't going to give you peace in any case. Now the only that we've got is each other. And my experience this summer with the 5 weeks in China, working there, working there helps. And then immediately I was two months in Japan, and those cultures, there couldn't be two other cultures so different from each other. In both cases, you're working one-to-one, no matter what was happening with the difference in ideologies or philosophy or language or shape, size or color. Was not affected. It was a mutual project, making art. Now my other hope was

, before I used to say that, you know like with the only two really noble professions any more that are not being used as weapons, and one of them is sports. And now they've used sports. Really, it's just disgusting. It isn't fair, you know.

BS: Well, wouldn't you use art as a political statement if you were going around the world trying to get people to believe in peace and to work for peace?

RR: I don't think, that's what I was talking about, like I don't have specific messages like that. I'm not interested in forcing anyone to think something else. But I'm certainly willing to shake them loose a little bit, so that they might be able ... I've done that all my life. You know, I get these letters saying like, when people say to me, My son could do that, or my daughter could do that, that's a compliment. If they can, you know, but usually they can't either or wouldn't. Franz Klein used to say, they say that to me, but the kid never knows when to stop.

BS: That's the difference, right? There's one thing I'm a little confused about. Is your, I have heard you say sometimes that art is just supposed to reflect reality. You are trying to simply show what is already there, but it sounds now as if you are saying that you want to do something about reality; you want to change what seems to be the course towards war.

RR: Well, I think the world is, either I wasn't aware (that can also be true), but I think that the big difference in then and now is that we do, nearly everybody has the capability of destroying the earth, and so if I can address my work to

BS: How do you mean nearly everybody, you mean every country?

RR: Every country has had their own atom bomb, and yet they still have the same number, even more disagreements, you know, so the grievance has actually grown, and the trust is like nowhere, and so that's a major difference. And if I can, if my work can aggressively suggest that they are in control of their lives, and not the governments which are restricting them.

BS: And how do you do that?

RR: By showing them their own world. By inviting them to be in their own world. To give them back their own confidence personally, as an individual. So it is a little bit more forceful now. It's I think things are much worse.

BS: There's one more question. There are those who have said, in the gallery I noticed a couple of people saying this, there are those who say that in your earliest work you actually used objects right off the street; you were very poor and you didn't have that much money to buy materials, is stronger and grittier than some of what they see today. What they see today is more finished and more beautiful, more accessible. Do you think that's true?

RR: Actually I can't tell. But I do know that familiarity makes something more valuable, so that I also remember that when I did those works, they were totally unacceptable. I know that I couldn't afford them at Park Burnetts now, so what they're doing is very, it's just normal, and I intend it to be about 3 sets of esthetics ahead of my own popularity. And I wouldn't want to lose that head start.

BS: Have you heard any interesting reactions to your work recently?

RR: No, I haven't even sobered up from the opening. Not really, I have, actually what I've been doing is interviews. You know what happens though? It's a little scary, because about the third time you hear yourself saying something, you start wondering if it's true. You know. I mean it started out perfectly true, but you know, there's something about hearing it again, and actually I like the things that I believe now because they're forcing me to be brave, and you know I'm a terrified person! That was a good one, you see now I enjoy it when I say something every now and then like that. But there's so many of the just basic facts, you have to go over and over again. I mean, it's not unfair for you to ask at all, you know, because you're trying to make something cohesive here, so if somebody's driving on the street, they're not going to say What in the hell is he talking about. I mean, that's a waste of my time and your time if it's that. So I don't mind that, but I had one today, and I just refused it. He hasn't seen the show, he was a UPI guy. And he wanted to come by around 2:30, and I said, Well I'm just not doing it until you see the show. I mean like What are you going to be talking about?

BS :He really hadn't seen the show?

RR: I don't think he read the book either. I mean at least if you don't see the show, then read the book. But he is the President of something of the UPI art ...

: You know some people come in with this thick kind of line that they want to come at you with, and they're not open.

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RR: How close can a line be to any fact if they haven't even bothered either to look at a book or see the thing, it's unnecessary, so I told him, I said, Don't even come by tomorrow, until you go to the show. He said, Oh I'll go, I'll go. I thought if he went by this afternoon, he could come by tonight, because I need help with this Rocky thing because I really do believe in it, and like my reception from the Chinese, fuck Reagan. I didn't want to say this either, so, but I think most of the things I said about China I think is good for them, you know. Did you hear anything that could offend anybody?

: No no, it was complimentary.

BS: I'm not sure it was complimentary, but I can't imagine ..

RR: It was hopeful.

: That they were open to your work, that they would ...

BS: Oh yes, but I was thinking you meant about our government.

: See, I mean the whole thing that they're trying to do in Washington ...

RR: Maybe I didn't fall down the stairs. Maybe the government fucked me. Always do it the same, right. But like Russia said outright, I had a very good contact with Moscow. A direct line with Pontus Hulton and this woman, and he's already (do you know P. Hulton? - he's from B ,)and he just quit the mocca thing, and he's going to, his new job is the 1988 Olympics are going to be in Paris, and they're going to address it to the arts. They said they're rebuilding Paris.

BS: Wow, isn't that great? Maybe we can get over there.

RR: They have \$8 billion set aside.

BS: Yeah, I just can't even imagine that. What that relates to, what they spend on the Olympics.

RR: Brought up to date with parks and all kinds of things, sculptures, most of my - this guy, Metterand? he called Pontus, he said like I know we have this reputation now of doing, you know, of being chauvinistic again, and he said, well we're not going to give that up, but he said I won't make it impossible for you to get outside art, that if you can at least
(end of tape side A)

Side B

(telephone) with Fred Winship, UPI

RR: Hello? ... taking all the photographs, I take the photographs all the time anyway, and it always functions to enhance and familiarize me with the local environment, and so when like living and working in a place that's alien as China the necessity of the duty to take thousands of photographs of China at the same time, knowing that I was going to be able to share that information with the public, who the majority isn't going to be able to go to China, became sort of a noble adventure.

FW
2: How did people receive your art?

RR: You shouldn't ask me, because it sounds a little bit too ambitious, but there were thousands of people who like, all looking their best, having a great time, smiling up and down Green Street, where we had three galleries, just a great way to, it was even drizzling, but it didn't matter. And it was just a great way to start the New Year. It made me very optimistic.

FW: Why did you use the University of South Florida ... ?

RR: I've worked with that workshop for some years now, when Don was running it, and I did some of my strangest works there. I did my first ceramic pieces, and broke a few other records there. I like the workshop very much and I think that Tampa is one of the prettiest little cities in the world.

FW: (can't hear)

RR: I don't know what was lined up. I'm supposed to do some signing, and I don't know if that was in Tampa or in Fort Myers. Do you have any photographic stuff?

FW: I sure do. when you're here, you'll probably see it.

RR: Uh huh. And what is it scheduled for? Oh, it is scheduled for Thursday.

FW: quite a lot of coverage.

RR: (not on phone now) they had never made any hardware. But what do you have if you mix anything, you know, if something is claiming to be indestructible except sharp blows I guess. The Ayatollah busted one.

FW: I also saw in your brochure, it said that these will endure minor earthquakes. (laugh)

RR: That's pretty thorough research, right? It's not libelous. They say, Well we meant, that wasn't minor enough, that one.

FW: But you can go to Babylon and see the tiles and the great
....

RR: And so all of the hardware had to be constructed out of the same material, because even bronze you know, can't last that long.

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And another thing that interested me in working with ceramics was that as a painter, and using you know mixed media, I hadn't been able to very successfully do outside works, and the possibility of maybe doing an entire building in ceramics is a very romantic idea. We had as a test, not as a test, but as just something like almost our mascot, was an early test piece that they had done like in a drawing, because they were having red in it because red is one of the most difficult colors, because it has to have low firing or else it dulls, so bright red, orangey red is a problem for them. So I sent them a drawing that they could start doing some research on with a lot of red in it, and so I had that in my, I had a bamboo garden outside this little fifteenth-century Japanese house that I was staying in, and it stayed outside, and it rained every day, so it was put through quite a test there. It was always reassuring that I was on the right track.

FW: How did you come to the idea, in sort of just painting a glazing on the tile in colors, your own concept, if you used sort of this silk screen collage?

RR: What do you call those? Glaze transfers. That's technical. I brought with me, I wanted it to be a Japanese-American project, and you know, I take a lot of photographs, and so I picked, I selected a group of, I made an American palette of photographs and before I got started, I went, Okay, I went to the plant and Shigaraki, and was briefed technically, like I was intimidated technically by all the chemical apparatus that they had there.

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And went to Osaka, and took photographs, so that I had a mixed palette of information, American and Japanese. And one of the companies, I mean where they really very precise is doing photograph work on the clay, but I roughed it up a bit, because they're used to doing absolutely precise things. It can be used for President's palaces or graveyards, and in both of those cases people worry about the color of pink on the cheek. And I had to loosen them up, saying that you know, for years I've been dependent on all reproductive systems, and the quality or the lack of the specific quality, or the lack of quality, has always been out of my hands, and part, I think the most interesting aspect of my palette, I mean a lousy reproduction can make a gorgeous painting.

FW: I saw in the catalogue thing of someone else, these life-size photographic-like works. They were frightening.

RR: Oh, did you notice the tie on each one? I mean, if you have it done, this won't work. You need a really outrageous tie. You know what that reminded me of was in the Eu in Florence, there are these, I didn't see it the first time I went around, and fifteen years passed, and I went back, and I started looking at these same masterpieces, and I began noticing that some of the angels had plaids, and some had checks, and a lot of them had colored wings, and it was the eccentricities of it that held the attention.

FW: We get a lot of that in business, you know. gotten into Italy through Venice.

RR: But it's not the classic qualities, it's individualistic, eccentric aspects of them, the incongruities of things that have

separated these pieces from masterpieces, to just more works by the same great artist.

FW: Well, you said they were noted for doing sort of old masters on tiles, but you did get around to that, with the Mona Lisa and Madonna D ...

RR: Okay, that was a separate series. That's what I call the recreational series, and the perfection of the hardware and some of the just physical things that I was asking, you know, these high tech clay to do, was it took so much time, and it established, you know, bred so many problems, that I was really getting, after two months, for crying out loud, that's a long time to be working on just a single project, and I used three months because there was a month in between there while they caught up with the photographic work, and I was getting exhausted. And one day they went off to discuss all the business aspects of what I was doing, and it was the first time, it was on a Sunday, that I'd been a room other than my bedroom without from 7 to 30 people in it. Just all day and all night, you know.

FW: ~~xxxx~~ groups, don't they?

RR: Yes they do. You'll never catch one!

FW: Do you know how many people Mr. Tanaka brought to our office yesterday? Six.

RR: Just a quiet talk, right? I know. Okay, so there was one day they made a mistake. They went over to this business meeting, and while they were gone, I just took a deep breath and relaxed and started looking around, and I found these Mona Lisas, these

B s, these Rafael's, Corbets, just sitting around in an old warehouse, you know, and so I thought, I wonder if they'd let me use these too, and so when they came back, I told them, I said, I think I have a ^{terrible} ~~fax~~ idea, but it sure would be a lot of fun. And so that's why those are called recreational. So I asked, could I have one of these, could I have one of these. They started bringing them in - those were already on the tiles. That's like if I find a sofa, you know, on the street, you know it was like being back in the big

 here, just looking for materials to work with. And I had such a good time with those, because they had none of the threatening seriousness that all the other inventions had, that we had to cope with with their material. We were literally fighting the possibility, fighting and discovering the possibilities of the clay itself, after it had been so refined. See, one of the reasons that this is such unique material is that it is extremely high fired first, then ground up, and treated all over again. But within that, I think, you know that the clay forgets that it was a mountain, and so I had to educate the clay again to look like the brother of a mountain.

FW: How did you do the chain in the links?

RR: Those were very delicately done, low fire after low fire, so that the glazes wouldn't dissolve, and freeze the mobility. Supposedly the bamboo, the single bamboo called axis ...

FW: Well, that's an even taller one.

RR: No, it's the same. The ceiling is lower here (laugh).

Couldn't afford a bigger place. They had done some research, and they're claiming that that's the tallest single-casted piece in ceramic. I thought that those funeral pieces were-- in India, you know, those big elephants and horses? But it seems they were fired in many pieces. I almost got struck down by a viper with my travelling ignorance, by trying to figure out where the seams would be and I couldn't find any, so they just were done very well. But they're done in many parts. So they may be right about that. But if I had thought that I was shooting for a record, I might have wanted to add a couple more feet on it.
(laugh)

FW: Did you first make the bamboo poles as supports for the hinge piece, or did the _____ come first?

RR: Well, I'll tell you. This piece, all the bamboo arrived at the same time, and this piece was so unique that it's the one that suggested to me that it be a piece by itself. And you know, it's not just work, but it's listening and looking at your materials too that tells you what to do.

FW: Are all the objects on display at Castelli, are those all unique, I mean are you going to repeat any of them?

RR: No no, they're all unique. There are, like three more variations of each one, but each one was very carefully considered and built itself.

FW: Are you planning to do any more in this medium?

RR: I'm going back. I'm going to go back and do some recreational pieces because I really want to keep the ones that I have, and

that was such an odd experience, and I think I really owe it to the company to do some more. I'm going over in the middle of February for an international paper conference in Kyoto, and the main reason that I'm doing that is because I want to introduce and show my Chinese paperworks, mostly for the Chinese sake, who are still having trouble diplomatically getting along with the Japanese. I mean, rightly so too, because that was a brutal occupation that the Japanese .

FW: Yes, it all came out again this year, rewriting the history books. Did you study any of the early Japanese pottery? Funerary urns and human figures?

RR: I haven't.

FW: So it's a long tradition there.

RR: The only other time that I worked with clay was the University of South Florida in Tampa, and I had, I went all over the south preparing a mixture that was the color of cardboard boxes, and I cast cardboard boxes in molds.

FW: Is that the university with the Indian domes, those buildings, at Tampa?

RR: No, at least I've not seen that. Have you been to the Orient?

FW: Yes, I worked out there. I was the bureau manager for UPI Hong Kong back in the 50s and then I had two years in India.

RR: I'm sort of afraid that there's this club owned by City Bank that wants to make an exhibition of mine, and it seems that I'm so afraid that it might clog up my works because what I'm heading for is the National Museum in Beijing by May the 2nd.

And our country's relationship (don't print this) with the Chinese, is, has deteriorated so rapidly that it's just terrible. I mean, I was really a very good friend of the entire family of the Deputy Minister of Culture. He was actually the Minister of Culture, you know, but it's called Deputy because he's not the Minister. And they were very excited about my job, and I just got a very weak letter, very short, but polite, saying that I must understand why they can't do it now. And I don't know why that has to be, but it has to be because of Reagan. And Reagan is just throwing those guys right into the arms of Russia again.

FW: This is interesting. You know the Wally Finlay gallery up in
 , (surely) well Jimmy Bornack you know took that over to Wally Finlay all the time; he is the first big gallery owner in New York to establish this wonderful contact with the Chinese government, and when he had that big show last year, four of their major artists who worked in different styles, one was then
 's daughter, and he is the number one man. He was very pleased to have his daughter exhibit in New York. That opened a door to all of that commune art, and you know, it's very clever naive art, beautifully done, and Jimmy has just gotten a contract with Hallmark Cards to supply art for Hallmark, with these marvelous peasant paintings. And he seems to have had no problem yet, but he said the last time he was there, he felt there was a certain coolness.

RR: When I was there, I certainly wasn't part of it, but it started while I was there, when things started cooling off. But I think

several diplomats were like exchanged, like three from China were withdrawn, and two from there were expelled, and so that was the beginning. But it's just gotten worse. It's front page nearly every day about some new kind of punishment, you know, retaliation for some oversight or another. But even in the newspapers, it's written so abstractly, it's hard to know exactly what it is.

FW: Well, you know I'm with UPI; we maintain a bureau there.

at the moment, and a photographer, and well you just have to read between lines with some of the things they say. I have a friend who's going over to teach for a year at the Beijing Conservatory. He's taking his wife, who is a secretary of a charity organization, and I told her that, you know, I said I hope you're not really making a mistake to go - two years? A housewife; she has nothing to do. I've given her the names of a few girls I knew there. Now when is your show in Japan? Does that come before

RR: I don't know what the date is. It has to be during the week that I'm there for (is Terry still downstairs?) It's going to be the ceramic pieces there. Actually they sent this crew over here to see how the Americans would present them.

FW: And they will be in Tokyo?

RR: They're going to be in Tokyo for one night, can you imagine? Three tons of clay installed in a matter of a half a day!

FW: Well, insulation isn't easy, is it?

RR: Right, I mean they're heavy. It takes strong walls, and so they're

prefabricating walls, so that they'll be ready to go in measurements and things, and I've designed triangular walls for the installation. They were going to do squares, and I didn't, I said, a square in the middle of a room will just remind you that you've got nothing on the walls, you know, esthetically, and so I've done these isosyles (sp?) triangles designed for that, so that they can prefabricate them and move them around.

: February 15th. And then it goes, the very next day, it moves to Kyoto.

FW: And that will be there longer.

RR: Yes. The cultural scene over there - it's hard for Americans to understand, they have gorgeous museums, no one ever goes. They've got some gorgrous places, you know, in prime locations, and nobody goes. Everybody goes to the department stores. Now better than the department stores are the main hotels. So I'm even, my show is more prestigious because it's in one of those chains of, in Tokyo, let's see, what's the name - Royal? Prince Hotel. You know, if you said that to an American artist who wasn't aware of the society, it would be like showing at Walgreens.

FW: But the Japanese are far ahead of us in having fine art in department stores. I mean, we have in our department stores sort of framed art prints.

RR: Well, it's part of the life. They also have the finest foods to buy there. It's a really cultural center, the department stores are cultural centers.

- FW: Natural cultural centers. Historically when we talk about tiles, the only thing that's even close to what you attempted isn't it sort of the Portuguese scenic tiles, that you fit them together and you have this sort of a whole scene thing? I don't think there's anything else in tiles.
- RR: The Byzantines made friezes. In clay. The Spanish just did designs. The Portuguese developed the whole scene thing, fitted together the blue and white tiles. But I don't know anyone's who's done anything approaching - you've really created a whole new art form. Do you feel that way?
- RR: I do, but I can't say things like that. (laugh)
- FW: What did the Japanese that you worked with feel, you wanted to touch a hole right through one of those tiles, but you did two places I remember.
- RR: They all said it was absolutely impossible. And then we started figuring out how we could do it. And it must have been 50 experiments about just getting something that I in my professional or material ignorance thought, I'd just dig my fingers in and, you know, open up the clay. But that's what I've been saying. This clay is so super-refined, it doesn't even remember it's in the family of earth.
- FW: Well, it's a company secret, I suppose, what's been added to this clay? I mean, I asked Tanaka, I said, Do you mix plastics or anything? He wouldn't say anything.
- RR: Right, there were certain areas that, in the first week or so, would say No photographs in this area. But after that everyone

got so busy, you couldn't tell what was going on in that area anyway, you know, so it didn't matter. I was afraid it would maybe be a lot like the secret of the world's best paper - you know, the big secret is that there's no secret. It's just well made.

FW: What do you think of the prices posted at Castelli? Do you think they are realistic? \$400,000 for the big piece?

RR: I think so. A panel this large costs the company, I mean I think that the company, see I have to set my prices there because if the company is going to recover its expenses, which I want it to because I'd like to see Roy Lichtenstein, who does all those sculptures and free-standing things, get him off the walls, stop this freeze business, that you know they're hung up on. And I think Roy has some very unique ideas about how to use the clay. I mean, much more so than ...

FW: 8 panels cost the company?

RR: Terry knows that. I think the 2 x 8 is over \$200,000, just in construction. You see, some of the prices aren't unreasonable. But it is expensive.

FW: And where would you like to see these works go? Would you prefer them to go into museums rather than ?

RR: I'd love to see them go outside. That's my first work that I've ever done that would be built to withstand weather, and I think it would be a shame to put it in the house. I was going to put one of them out here, just for ...

FW: That lets most of our museums out.

RR: The Museum of Modern Art has a garden. They have those gorgeous

generous, very friendly. I never got to the first step in making a friend with a Japanese. I wondered if something was wrong with me. Now, you found them charming, I take it.

RR: Insistent, I would say.

FW: In any other sense of a formal relationship; of course with the wives of to meet as I had to, I never got anywhere.

RR: As sociable as it got, it was always such a plan, you know, just never changed. I mean everything, there was a certain style about everything that you did, and it was already preconceived and worked out, there was never like sitting down and letting the evening develop. It had already been choreographed for you, you know, and I don't know ...

FW: I sometimes thought when I was there, on business, was taken out by various Japanese businessmen to geisha houses and all, that this was all planned so one never got into a serious conversation.

RR: I got so tired of all these women looking, just don't even know me, you know. Keep your hands off, I don't even know you. Don't sit there and say silly things in my face, you know. Because my life is very serious. And so, I tried to avoid some of those places, but I had to with like the President of Osaka, who wanted to like formally make sure that I checked out with the rest of the boys, and I was the hottest thing with the girls, and I'm not the hottest thing with the girls, for crying out loud, you know. I never wanted to be. But I can drink!

FW: As a Westerner, you don't even know what the limits are, what you're supposed to do.

RR: I found myself in the best nightclub in Tokyo, standing on a platform singing a duet with the woman who owned the place. Now, if that's not the pits! While the chairman ...

FW: What were you singing?

RR: I was sort of Doo-wah. She was singing in Japanese, and I was trying to get into rock, you know. But I mean this was qualified. When he saw this, then he left. So this is when I also thought, I have a very ambitious project, which is four years travelling around the world taking my work to, well I won't say Third-World countries, but to countries who are absolutely not familiar with abstract art at all, except what they do. Right, exactly. Like, so Sri Lanka, and China is the first stop. And then I want to go to Moscow, we have 5 stops in Australia, so that makes a little more sense, that's not so revolutionary. And, while I still have the energy to move and be able to work in these countries, I also want to do video with them, and I'll leave them for their treasury, and, but share the experience. And then take the experience from that country ...

FW: Well, don't give the National Museum in Melbourne anything. I mean they can afford over a million dollars for American paintings right along.

RR: I know, maybe I'll just pick up something there, right?

FW: Have you seen any of the aborigine art, which is made of ? Very very interesting abstract art.

RR: Yeah, so I'll be learning and developing and sharing information and so that by the time, maybe by the time that, if the show in

China is postponed, maybe I'll have five different countries to show them, and my work then will just function as a catalyst, you know, and will almost be useless except as an excuse to go there. But I do think that my work has sort of a, with the uses of images and colors and I don't know--the excessives--of essential response to physical materials, you know, I think it has a universal quality that goes beyond the specific ego trip. Because my work is about communication, and it is about aggressively wanting peace, and I think that if I can get in to all these countries, there are 24 countries that I want to go to; if I can get into all these countries, I think I can slow the next war down. That sounds very ambitious, but I was sure in both about China and Japan, that a one-to-one contact was a lot more important than fictitious agreements about bans on war.

FW: Is Burma on your list?

RR: Yes.

FW: I hope so, because there's so little cultural contact, and it's a charming country. The people are like, just sealed off from the world. Got an awful government, whatever it is, generals or lieutenants or whatever took over ...

RR: I think the tour is going to have like to regroup many times, because of the politics that are going on in the world right now, but that's what makes it important.

FW: Have you seen the film Gandhi?

RR: Not yet.

FW: Oh, you must see it. Copyright restrictions apply.

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