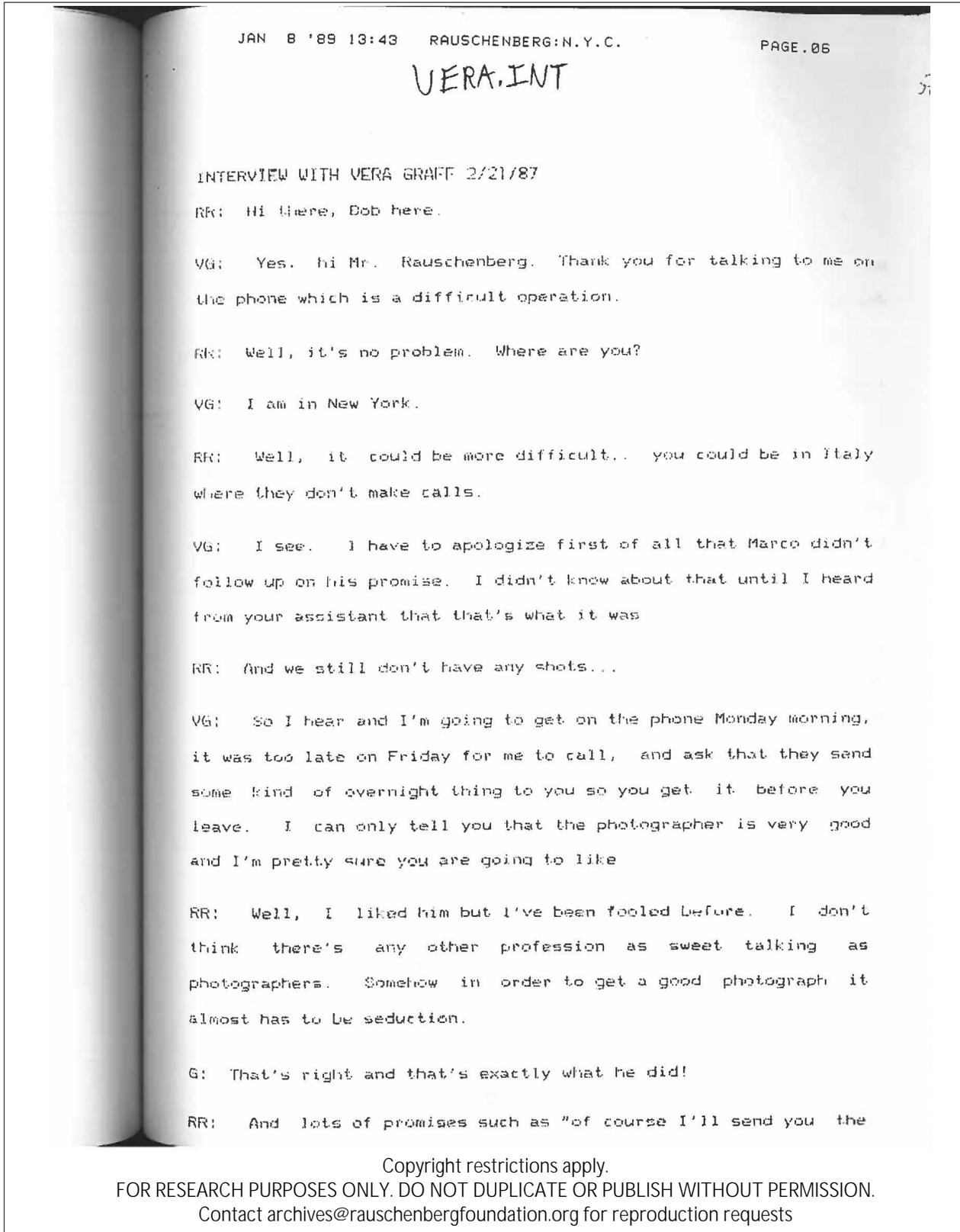


RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Bound Compilation of Robert Rauschenberg Interviews, 1985-1987 /
Graff, Vera / Interview with Robert Rauschenberg, 1987



contacts before I show them to anyone" and so forth.

VG: No, that's not right.

RR: And "we'll only take ten minutes".

VG: I see, and it took what, two hours?

RR: I think it was three days. He came back the next day and then the next day. But I don't mind that, I mean if I had a job to do I would take as much time as it took to do it, I think.

VG: Oh absolutely, and I'm sure he did it very well and I hope I can get these to you.

RR: You haven't seen them either?

VG: No, what I have here is a couple of black and white xeroxes which I can see very little, but enough to see that we're talking about your New York studio because there's a church involved. And there's some of your new work on the wall, at least some of the work that I saw at Castelli's. And so there is a whole series of that, six or seven, with some little sculptures of chairs, one of them on a square block which looks like stone, and there must be a portrait but they didn't send them to me. They just send me these to be sure I knew what we were talking about.

RR: They're so generous. A few little dumb photostats, right?

VG: It's really rough. I mean, I have no idea what photographs Marco took and here we are doing this and it's for an architecture magazine basically and so maybe if you have a few minutes maybe talk about the space for a moment which is probably

far from your mind right now in Florida, but I was reading through that off the wall book last night and got a little bit of the details and background on when you bought it and what it was. It seems to have been a mission...

RR: It was a full size Catholic church originally and then it was, at the same time, an orphanage. It was an existing, running orphanage. In fact it started closing down when they passed that child labor law because the kids would eat oatmeal and then rush off to work.

VG: You mean that was in the '60s still?

RR: Oh no, not then, maybe 1860's or something like that.

VG: Oh before. I was terrified. I thought this happened just recently.

RR: No, not at all. I still had to clean the oatmeal out of the stove! I don't know what year exactly that they moved to Staten Island but it was shortly after it was illegal for children to go to work. They had already sold off what appears to be what was the chapel, or one third of the full-size Catholic church. And that became a filling station first and then it became a parking lot. There is a gorgeous photograph of the place in a book of architecture in New York.

VG: It's not the cast iron?

RR: No, this is the regular old Italian brick I believe.

VG: And it has five floors?

RR: Five floors and two basements.

VG: Fantastic. So you bought it actually because at that time you were very involved with the theatre and with dance and all those activities...

RR: I was involved with all that but I actually bought it because I couldn't afford to rent anymore. So I had to buy my own place. I was one of the first artists to think like that which triggered a whole other group of activities. Because artists were living in New York illegally. You had at least three groups of officials that could throw you out...one being your landlord; and one being the building inspectors and another being the firemen.

VG: So you were constantly on the run.

RR: Right. And so unless you were really an expert in bribery, then you couldn't do it...but artists have always upgraded all the properties they have ever been in. Then the next thing they do is the landlords try to get rid of them.

VG: The artists are always the spearhead of the development, which is really quite sad in the case...

RR: I know, because it is very perverse...it's almost suicidal. Because say, in New York the artists have almost run themselves out of town again.

VG: Well, in fact many of my young friends go to Williamsburg and Newark today to live which would have been considered impossible in those days.

RR: I know...I think it was the ghost...what is that park down by the Battery called? (VG: Tribeca?) I think Tribeca has all but been overdeveloped and now is very chic to live in and the last I heard there were a bunch of artists moving up into Harlem...but it's not going to be long before all the rich professionals will be out buying them there too.

VG: To bring this sort of dire prediction to a close, I think ultimately New York is going to lose its young talent and those people will go to Texas, Los Angeles, and those places that offer them more hospitable environments.

RR: You would think that New York would care more about that...it should be one of the most sophisticated places...but I think...I always find it difficult when people ask me, because I travel an awful lot and I always find it difficult when people say, do you think it's necessary to live in New York? With a blush, I always say yes because there is sort of a threat about existing in New York that I never found anyplace else and I've

lived all over the world. There is something about if you can survive the peculiarities and the difficulties and the threats of New York City, well then I think you could be a REAL artist.

VG: But for you in the meantime, New York has become one leg but certainly not the most important.

RR: Well, I have said that anytime, even though I am down here, it wasn't terribly easy working in China or Tibet or in Chile either. I don't really have to, with my schedules and my appetite for travel, I don't have to go too far to find it. And so I renourish my feelings of doubt and concern in New York and these other places. But nothing ever really replaces for me the collaboration aspects of working in the City with other artists.

VG: And the possibilities...if you think of your recent installation at the Metropolitan Museum for instance...that must have brought you to New York for quite a while...

RR: I think we hung it in about a week.

VG: It was done in Florida?

RR: Yes, it was done all over the place but mostly in Florida.

VG: And you hung it in about a week?

RR: I brought my own crew up. Many of them had never been to New York before in their lives too so I work on both sides of the street there. I'm just as good at corrupting as I am at being corrupted.

VG: If I could only quote you in this context, but you know those stuffy old architectural magazines, they're not going to have this...Rauschenberg standing on a pedestal, like Germans have this idea about culture, you see, and it's the Beethoven bust on the piano and unfortunately I think you, and everyone else up there has become a Beethoven bust. And that is a very strange concept.

RR: Well, I have long fingers and the span, but I can't play the piano.

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VG: Tell me a little bit about the works that I see sort of dimly on this xerox...the ones in your last show at Castelli.

RR: They're the GLUTS series. And those will be exhibited I guess within the next month in Dusseldorf or someplace. Hans Schmidt...do you know where that is? I think it's Dusseldorf, but you can check on that.

VG: And they are found signs...obviously, yes, they are.

RR: Yes. The material is roughly off the streets and somehow addressed to travel, traffic and man's unerring sense of greed.

VG: How does the sense of greed come into that?

RR: Well that's why they're called GLUTS.

VG: I like it. A very timely, they're very timely pieces. Do you think of them as very political pieces? (RR: Yes.) At that point when you made them things hadn't quite reached the proportion that they have now but I think it was in the wind wasn't it? (RR: It certainly was.) And you felt disturbed by that? (RR: Yes.) But New York is very much about greed, the underbelly of all the glory of cultural communication is the immense greed and not caring for others and all that which is something that we all realize...

RR: I'm watching on television right now...five dalmations who are trying to chew up someone...dog eat dog? I think New York is about a lot more than that, but I really love New York and seriously believe that it has more soul than it does danger.

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VG: I think everyone who lives here does or else we wouldn't be here.

RR: Well, we like a little of both.

VG: Anything else you want to say about these new pieces? Do you always keep the later pieces, the ones that you have just

worked on, around, or is that just an accident in this case?

RR: Usually the last pieces that I've ever done usually are the last to be popular because I've found that people like the security in history and it takes a few years to get used to an image. I would rather die than be a stylist. I am for doing what I don't do the best. But then the next time I try to do something it's something else and then everybody says well maybe those other things weren't so bad.

VG: So what you do, that I think is great, is that you keep old pieces and they speak to you and there's a dialogue going on between the new work and the old work, obviously.

RR: Well I don't have many older works. I really don't. If I had any I would have sold them to support the round the world tour, ROCI.

VG: I see...you'd be much richer than you are if you still had...;

RR: No, just as poor. I'm practically...everything has been going into this peace trip...

VG: Tell me a little bit more about that. I'd like to include

RR: Okay. It's the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange.

What we do is...we have amassed works and been inspired by and delivered to five separate countries...to Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China and Tibet.

VG: I saw that show at Castelli Greene Street so that gave me an idea of what's going on there.

RR: And the idea is, too, ...when I was working in China, one of the most disturbing things that I found was not the suppression or the censorship or the politics, but it was the fact that it was impossible for anyone who lived there to find out what was going on anywhere else, in most cases, more than thirty kilometers away. You would have to have a petition signed by five people to go visit a cousin. I think that the only hope for people getting along is to know more about each other. I mean internationally, or planetarily, or anything.

VG: When you deal with China...we're all a little bit naive about the amount of freedom that can be squeezed out of those countries, but I guess one can do something...has the recent developments changed your relationship with China in that sense? I mean, the protests and the clamping down and the obvious climate of nervousness...

RR: I wasn't surprised at all because given some overnight freedom, which I sort of felt I was partially responsible for, it has got to be exaggerated is the next move. And I also thought, and this is just my unofficial opinion, that probably the Chinese

officials were not necessarily exaggerating that but advertising it so that it would be clear that they also had natural new problems about freedom. I'm no political expert but I thought that was probably why they aired all of that information. They could have killed information just as easily...they've been doing it for years. They're specialists in that. And the fact that we saw photographs of the conflict seem to me to be a very healthy development.

VG: And personally for the development of your ROCI, you think it spells well for you?

RR: I think so. We've had amazing turnouts everywhere that we have gone. It was something like...after the second week, the count was something like 78,000 people had come to the show...you see we ARE there when these things are going on. We go there before, to study. And so you can feel the interest. Terry Van Brunt does a video...that was the other thing that I was leading up to...what was so terrible about the limitations on travel and information in China was the fact that unless you know what other people fear or love or drink or eat or how they dance or what they look like...well then everybody is a threat. It is a little bit ... it sounds simplistic. But it took three years to get into China. Two years to get into Tibet. The complications stopped it from being a simplistic idea.

VG: And you chose those countries because...

RR: I liked to think that we would only use our time in sensitive areas. We're not calling anyplace third world. We were in Japan and I think Japan should be considered a sensitive area too. We're going probably next to Australia, Sri Lanka and possibly Cambodia and all the hot spots. Then we're going to turn our attention to...we're just beginning to be able to negotiate with the Russians.

VG: Well the climate seems to be better these days. (RR: You mean winter in Russia?) Well, things seem to be melting somewhat.

RR: But that changes overnight. That's what happened with the President and that teenage tennis player from China...my show was canceled overnight.

VG: It is a very deepseeded, different mentality. If you look at the Russians, for instance, it is interesting to see how they will react to your work. It is like being confronted with unlimited freedom (RR: Or me to them.) or you to them...

RR: It works both ways.

VG: I was talking to Kohimar and Melanie who are working here in Manhattan, you know...the two Russian artists...and they seem to, after almost ten years in New York, still live and work and think in those terms of supervision and a state eye on you because they

function as each other's censor. They cannot bear to be free. Therefore they need someone to exercise some tremendous authority over one another.

RR: And so they do that on themselves?

VG: They do that on themselves because they can't find anyone else to do it in this country. (RR: It's the wrong place...) They can't handle it. So I'm very curious to hear what happens...

RR: I did a project, I guess six years ago, with Voznesensky, and we got along just beautifully. In fact I felt like I was the Russian. He had a girlfriend in every garage or something. Anyway, he is perfectly charming and when he went back to Russia he started doing some dance events which I thought was great because I do some of that myself.

VG: I know you have. And are you going to go into dance or theater again...

RR: Well I still have some things that are active in Trisha Brown Dance Company. In fact, we just came back from Naples, where I had to go over and work in the junkyard in order to make a set that I hadn't designed because her ship was lost at sea with all the costumes and sets. It's the most beautiful theater in Europe I think, that I've seen...the San Carlo Opera House.

It's several hundreds of years old.

VG: How was the junkyard in Naples?

RR: Expensive. They knew they had some gringos there with Yankee dollars.

VG: None of the free for all stuff?

RR: Somehow with the Italians, they're not used to shopping...they're so chic that they're not used to shopping in the junkyard. So I don't know if we got the best deal. I bought the junk and built the set in the same day and it was the day of the performance.

VG: Do you feel any closeness artistically and emotionally to those Arle Povera artists?

RR: Oh sure I do. I think they're terrific.

VG: I think they're wonderful and totally underrated in this country. It's beginning to be...

RR: The P S I did a show there and I think that show then traveled didn't it? I saw it in Madrid in the big glass museums there, in the garden.

VG: Tell me, when you were in Rome in the early days, did you

have any contact with those people...did you know what they were doing then?

RR: I think I was earlier than that. But thanks.

RR: But thanks. Thanks. I was over there in the early '50s, in fact in the late '49s.

VG: I forget. You sound so incredibly young that I...

RR: There are certain advantages to the telephone you know. You can sound as beautiful as you want or as young as you want. You can't smell my liquor breath.

VG: Tell me one more thing and then I won't keep you any longer. Have you any thoughts ...

RR: If I were to say that somebody were better, or best...In fact I really dislike those artists that write those series articles on great moments of history in art. It's always implied that because, of course, they can't write about themselves, that they must be the exception.

VG: Are you talking about Frank Stella, for instance?

RR: A bunch...actually Salle did that and Bob Morris does it all the time. David Judd does it...

VG: Judd does it, but I think in sort of an amusing way because he's so cranky.

RR: I don't think it's funny though. I think that if you are a victim that his sense of humor would not suffice.

VG: That's true. I think they do it though in order to make themselves heard in a climate where everything is accepted. Rather imperfectly. I think that's something that some people don't like. Because being accepted is one thing, if it's accepted on it's own merits, but if you just do it because you think it's the right thing which many critics seem to do these days, it's kind of nice to hear someone whack away and have an opinion.

RR: But it's so inverted. It always implies that they themselves are the experts and therefore the exception (VG: and are better than the others) Right.

VG: So the artist as critic is the role that you do not undertake.

RR: That's why I left all that gallery-world. That's why I went on the road. (VG: But you're still selling and showing) Of course I am but that's...okay, you didn't read anyplace that I was showing in Tibet, did you? (VG: I didn't, no.) Or in China. The largest exhibition...so I don't really care about

those art magazines that are controlled. You didn't even see a review of GLUTS. (VG: No, I didn't.) You see? So I guess I'm getting my revenge or something. Because I thought the GLUTS show, excuse me...now I'm talking really personally, that it was one of the most interesting shows that not only had I done, but that I had seen in a long time. The energy there was so refreshing. Now, it might not be great art, but I thought that it was very refreshing. And I heard it on the streets but you don't find that kind of information in the art magazines.

VG: That's true. There's a lot of things that don't...it's pretty astonishing when someone of your reputation has a show and they don't write about it. That implies that they don't like it.

RR: Either good or bad. That doesn't matter.

VG: Some critics subscribe to the opinion that they'd rather not review it if they don't like it which is a cowardly position.

RR: That's understandable, but I think we're catching them on the run here with the Metropolitan 1/4 mile. They had nothing to do with that...they couldn't start it and they couldn't stop it.

VG: Did they try to?

RR: Who knows. I mean, the lack of editorial comments in say, the last six exhibitions that I had might imply that there was some conspiracy out. But I don't care, really. I just find

it...it isn't even that interesting.

VG: I think that the New York art world has lost some of its former multiplicity. It seems more and more a place where certain people, and it has happened before in the days of the Greenbergs, but now again it's a place where people discuss and make arrangements and there are a handful of people who are being constantly being written about and the rest is not. It seems to be... this kind of star system in art seems to be something that the critics and the art magazines want to promote.

RR: And what is really weird is that as the art world gets bigger and bigger, the number of people is smaller and smaller that get reported.

VG: And the conditions that people have under which to work I think get more and more difficult. A) They can't find places to live; B)...it's such a problem these days to stay out of all this hullabaloo and just do your work. I don't know if it was like that when you were a young artist...

RR: I had ... there was absolutely no choice. It was beautiful...I expected the worst. My rent was like \$15 in the summer and \$10 in the winter.

VG: That was on Fulton Fish Market. That's incredible. But that seems like the romantic past to us today.

RR: I know, it was also cold...and hot...and the plumbing went out the window.

VG: Tell me one more thing about the place on Lafayette Street...is it a comfortable place?

RR: Oh yes, it is just lovely. The woodwork is oak trimmed in cherry.

VG: And it has wonderful bathrooms and all the amenities. And a wonderful kitchen I hear...

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RR: Oh, the stove...Atlas...is gorgeous. That's good because I love to cook also.

VG: And I think on this note I will say thank you and goodbye. This is a very stuffy magazine and this is going to be a serious piece. I think unfortunately I'll have to come back and we'll go for a different publication.

RR: Sometime when I'm in New York.

VG: Would that be possible? I write for Schpiegel...

RR: I love Schpiegel...I've gotten a lot of drawings out of Schpiegel...

VG: Because when you do things like your global networking, that would be of interest to Schpiegel...and if those pictures don't get there tell your assistant to call me and...

RR: Well I feel badly because you don't have anything that you're talking about either...how can they treat you like that?

VG: They treat me very badly.

RR: They could treat me like that, I'm used to it...but I don't like them treating you like that.

VG: You know I love the way you say that, I think you should take charge of my life, but before that happens...

RR: We'll start in the morning...bye.