

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Bound Compilation of Robert Rauschenberg Interviews, 1985-1987 /
Petrasongren, Mils / Interview with Robert Rauschenberg, 1987

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Stockholm, March 5, 1987

INTERVIEW WITH MILS PETRASONGREN.

RR: Bushhopping...and he was playing with some German that I think he thought he was Frank Buck or somebody...bring 'em back alive. He really took all kinds of chances. We got stuck and some pygmys had to dig us out but before then he'd been very rude to them and screamed at them, oh no, don't touch the airplane. Then he shows off on the takeoff and sets the plane down, digs deep enough into the sand, he didn't have to go that far and he confessed that he was just showing off but we nearly had to spend the night there which I think he would have found probably more uncomfortable than myself because I'd already allied with the pygmys.

I am trying to go all over. I had just come back from China then. And since then I've been back to China also. I had an enormous exhibition...the largest they've ever had of any artist...in Beijing. In the National. I left after the second week because I was setting up a show in Tibet. At the end of the second week something like over 76,000 people had come. And for never seeing that kind of work, or any outside work, and the response otherwise...because they allowed me to give big talks and usually I don't do that professionally. If it's a really live and innocent audience it was fun.

MF: How did they respond?

RR: With great curiosity and a strange kind of intelligence that you couldn't see from their work. I mean if you were looking at their work you wouldn't know that they had that kind of artistic curiosity or intelligence. They just...I was just walking in a big...being carried practically by mobs from place to place.

MF: Where do you plan to go next?

RR: Well, we're working on Australia because that's such a varied place and I've never been there. They have a lot of wildlife. And eventually we want to get to Russia. We haven't had too much luck with that. Oh, we will go to Sri Lanka and possibly Cambodia on our way to Australia. The work got held up now...the last spot we were in was Japan.

MF: This is the world tour...this is the ROCI? Is it that you are looking for inspiration all over the world?

RR: I am looking for...I guess three things. Primarily inspiration is the most important byproduct but what I really want to do is to try to attempt to communicate with the rest of the world what the rest of the world is doing. I give Mexico to China. I give Tibet to Australia. Because when it's possible, it's not always possible because of the local politics stop you, but I do like to try to work with local artists which is really

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difficult. Because nearly everyplace has something that they are outstanding.

**: You have been traveling extensively then? And you have traveled a lot in your career?

RR: Yes. And I traveled with the dance company too. I traveled with Cunningham for over a year. We went to some really weird places. I traveled with the Judson Group and actually I have performed here, in Sweden, at the Museum here.

**: You did?

RR: Both. I was a performer and a choreographer and of course I had to do my own sets. But basically for Cunningham all I did was the sets, costumes and lighting. Which was quite a lot.

: ~~*~~ what is the first time in the 81 ~~***~~

RR: I guess so. It was around whenever Merce was scheduled here. What prompted this and got me in a lot of trouble because I was considered one of the three musketeers -- John Cage, Merce and me -- and in spite of all the democratic talk, that hierarchy still exists. I had a little piece of it. I had more fun with the dancers than sitting over talking about art with people I've known all my life. With the dancers, w'd go out and do things. Merce and John... Merce was too busy and John wasn't interested... and... how I got into trouble was... it wasn't my fault... Pontus had communicated with David Bond who is Merce's manager about the possibility of both of us within the Cunningham Company who did original work... original choreographers and dancers, why don't we set aside one or two evenings and have a programmed set. When I found out we were driving through the streets of Stockholm in the van with the company and there's a sign twice as big as it was for Merce... it was the first time any of us had seen any of it. I think Merce was just afraid that the dancers interest would get deluded.

**: How did Stockholm and the art life in Stockholm strike you at the time?

RR: It was wonderful. Actually, I had had more Swedish important artist friends of any nationality... Falstrom... who is also a multi-curious man... he'd write poetry one minute and music the next... I used some of his music for a dance piece of mine... something he did in... there was an Edgar Allen Poe poem... it was done in Swedish so I never really understood the whole thing. And his wife too, Barbara Posten. Per Utbert. He was visiting America for the first time and he got bored. I had a big studio and he said, you know you ought to turn this into a skating rink and so we got things going and we did a piece that we later performed in a skating rink.

**: At that time you and your friends were considered to be very provocative. Was this an exhilarating period in your life?

RR: It was marvelous because everything was so new to all of us. Jasper was new. Stella was new. Everybody was. They sort of turned away from the European standard of value because before that nearly all the American artists were not really American artists. They were still first generation from Europe, well Franz Klein wasn't but he might as well have been...he was from Pittsburgh...

##: How close were you as a group?

RR: We were very close because none of us had enough success to ruin our friendship. It's a combination of things. It's different people...dancers like Yvonne Rainer have been thrown on...they have their own style and have grown protective of it. And Frank (Stella)...I feel the same way. But the other part of it is that with all the success individually, rather than as a group, their responsibilities grew and for me, I still have to fight the time.

##: Do you ever think back on that time?

RR: Oh sure. It is nearly impossible not to. All of our behaviors were so dramatic and original that...there are so many experiences that I don't think that time could ever be recultivated. What else was going on was that...I was lucky enough to be on the edge of both...I was privileged to be personal friends with Bill de Kooning, Franz Klein, Rothko, Barney Newman...they were accessible. They were still accessible.

##: Why was it possible for these artists to "happen" at that time?

RR: Like, why couldn't it happen now?

##: Why did it happen at all in the first place?

RR: Because they were so subversive. There weren't but five galleries that would show American painting, contemporary American painting. Most of them were still selling Tapiesse, and Du Dupee, and even Bupee and Giacometti and the success hadn't come...the recognition. I think out of the loneliness and the frustration and the need to discuss ideas creatively, or even to have a good fight...I think that that was the anatomy of that time.

##:

RR: Yes. Or even just a complaint.

##: Of course, but I meant why is it not possible today? Today people don't fight over things?

RR: Right now, in just my neighborhood in Soho in New York, I'd say within a quarter square mile, which is not a large piece of

land, there are no less than 2000 galleries. In just that little area. It is a very concentrated art area. The artist goes directly from art school, without any visible or physical struggle, goes directly to a gallery and starts his one man show careers. All that cultivating, literally that gardening, that exploration of ideas and planting of new thoughts. Within a week after you are out of art school, you are working on your own career. And I think *** very slack. About the only way artists could see each other before was by visiting each other's studios. I mean, I could see Jim Dine...also another thing was happening there too...so it might not be as simple as some say...and that was that the "happenings" came about also and there was an enormous energy in that. There was no snobbery in the way you could perform. It could be on a rooftop, in a parking lot, in a gymnasium.

**: When was the last time you were in a "happening"?

RR: I don't know, because I started calling my pieces early on "theater works". It's been some time...I just, two years ago, I did a collaboration with Trisha Brown and I did the one the previous year with Trisha Brown and Laurie Anderson. I had to make the set...consisting of an enormous airplane-size fabric sort of pyramidal crystal and the silk was left over from NASA. I used those glider hardware that are so efficient and so easy to carry...and used these three inverted sculptures to project six movies that I made. That's not a simple painted background.

**: At that time you were provocative, before, and the works were for a very small audience. Today you are...

RR: Oh, the casts usually outnumbered the audience every time.

**: I mean, today you are traveling all over Europe, tremendously successful, and accepted by everybody.

RR: We went to...my friend Trisha Brown was performing in Lina Wurtmuller's CARMEN. She was one of the Carmens...the Prophet, who anticipated Carmen's sorceress ideas. I thought, of course with Wurtmuller doing it you'd see it in TV and in the cinema and then I found out that there were only to be nine live performances. It seemed incredibly extravagant. I'm not that crazy about Christmas anyway and it seemed like a good excuse to miss Christmas. We went over there and it was like here...it was the coldest weather they had ever had in their lifetime. Plus, Trisha's sets were lost someplace between Spain and Greece...that's where she had all these sculptures, the projectors and the other most recent set that she had had made by Nancy Graves. And so there we were, I was on the spot. The show must go on. I went to the junk yard and I knew the set because I had seen it made but there wasn't time enough in just two days to change the dance to go with a different set and so I made, from materials that I found right there in one day, I collected. And made a brand new set for the performance that evening. That's still pretty much a "happening".

##: Do you think there are some major challenges still remaining for you?

RR: Oh I hope so. My big fear is that I am going to run out of countries. Somehow I just don't feel that the moon is going to be as exciting.

##: Do you think that you have overcome all the artistic difficulties? You are accepted now. Is there any thing you can do to outrage your audience, if that is what you want?

RR: Oh never. I don't self-consciously search for that but if it comes up I certainly don't mind it. But that's another handicap. The audience now, you see we've ruined the audience, because now it's almost a real crime academically to be shocking. You can't just say "I think I'll do something shocking". That wasn't the way shocking work was made. There has been a move in that direction. A lot of painters, the youngest ones, are getting so academic. It started out with the German expressionists. And now they are into some sort of academic doodling and back to painting their old nightmares. The paintings are so uninteresting that I don't believe they are real nightmares.

##: Do you keep much in touch with the young artists?

RR: I do. I love them working for me. When I travel from place to place it's much easier to get in touch with them.

##: What do you think of the new Swedish painters?

RR: I haven't for some time. I don't know what...I think Per Ukbert was the last one that I saw. I saw Barbara Harris, but...I don't know...at a certain point...Per was doing what I thought was just amazing construction. Then, maybe a year or so later, somebody sent me a clipping that he had written about how awful my work was and how meaningless it was. And that was when I started asking about his. It seemed that he had taken on some new conservative ideology and had gotten completely into politics...left all that beautiful energetic work. And I haven't seen anything since. He did come around, I think, for my last show here.

##: Have you been called decadent by others as well, or is that the only...?

RR: Oh surely. You don't have to go very far in the country to find that.

##: You find that in many countries?

RR: Yes. Because it is indulgent, extravagant, large. It doesn't have a single mindedness to self-consciously change the world...they think.

##: I think that was in the '70s.

RR: Yes, I think that it was but still I don't think I'll ever be over it.

##: You never were political?

RR: I think any kind of art has to be political.

##: Do you think that they will complain that these Latin American i
ired pictures are
not political?

RR: I don't think so. Even the Latin Americans got it.

##: You have this kind of a thing in the US as well.

RR: I support a lot of politicians just in self defense. I make series of posters and sets of prints that help them pay for their campaigns. We have some really bad politicians in America right now.

##: But you don't tell that in your pictures.

RR: No, just like I don't put jokes in my pictures. But some of them are funny.

RR: I was doing the copper pieces first, the Copperheads. I got involved with the very simple ways that you could corrosively color the copper. Then that got a little fancy...a little too rich. I wanted to keep the reflectiveness that is essential for both. You spoke of the fact that these paintings are nearly impossible to photograph, because they are like being in crowds. They like being with people. You get a good photographer to do it and you get a big brown thing. You don't see any color.

##: ###

TVB: The reproduction down in Chile.

RR: It's a veil to force another visual athletic. Now you have to go through there. It also changes the color just like a wash. If it had been done flat we could have done that part of it but you wouldn't have had the exercise of having...looking through something.

##: When you do your pictures like this, do you make a sketch?

RR: Nothing.

##: Do you work directly then, head on?

RR: When I don't know what to do I go look out in the backyard.

##: Your always looking for junk, whatever you've found...

RR: Materials... materials that already had an identity usually.

##: Things that you cared about or that you had thought about.

RR: Well, they had used them. But I think I would pay more for that aspect that something has natural dents in it because no way could you ever fake that.

##: Well, the juxtaposition of each of these different elements, is it just coming to you, by free association?

RR: If I could draw it I would paint something else.

##: About photography, you've been doing photography your whole life?

RR: Actually, I was a photographer before I was a painter. When I was at Black Mountain College I studied with Albers as a painter too. I had to... I wasn't skilled enough in either one to be able to do both of them at the same time. I knew that I had make a decision there. I had to either get off the paint or pot.

##: You use photography all the time?

RR: It has always worked into my work. But it has just been maybe the last eight years that I have just insisted on using just my photography.

##: And these aren't supposed to go like this...this like the one sculpture together.

RR: No, it's not one. You can buy different units. The only rule that I have is that you can't just buy the small one. Because then you can just say that you have a Rauschenberg and that's all that it was. You can't see it here, but they stack. There is no top and there is no bottom. There is no up and down. The flat work got definitely a composition. But with these there aren't. Some of them you can turn if you get tired of them.

##: Do you often come back to a classic reference?

RR: I like old dogs too.

##: And that's sort of a link to...

END INTERVIEW

##: lives in Europe and he told me that he moved from Russia to

New York. In the United States, he said, art is a market. In the Soviet Union it is a serious problem.

RR: You can kick the chair if you want to talk. Don't make me sit down. I can't paint when I sit down.

##: Bob, can you...

RR: I can answer questions. Any kind...hostile...I don't have a plan.

##: Neither have I.

RR: I don't mean about today, I mean about the future.

##: Why have you chosen to work with metal in these big works?

RR: I have been attracted to the response of reflective surfaces since the early fifties. Because it brings the room in and admits that the dedication in the artwork is related to all the changes that are happening about it. This started very naively with small mirrors like this where you could just see something...in fact the first ones were hidden under veils so that you could just see something on a flat surface just moving...like a shadow. In a couple of periods before this I was using open mirrors to reflect not only the artwork itself, to make the artwork twice as big, but also to throw what was going on in the room on top of the image. The copper pieces and the stainless pieces are just a continuation of that investigation of how I can make something look as though it assumes the responsibility of the changes in the light and what was around it.

This is just something else. I already did the other. I haven't done everything in the other. I am very restless. When something starts looking as if I can handle it I sort of move away.

The objects in my works when I lived in New York were completely different and so the structure, the pieces were different. In New York you are working with an urban family refuse. Now, I have to go to junkyards or look on either side of highways. I think I have done just about enough rubber tire pieces, but I'm not sure. There might be a few more coming up. But those kinds of things...and cardboard boxes that have interesting names and things, always tend to be available. One of the first times that I started actually going to a junkyard. A junkyard in Fort Myers, Florida is not that interesting. You are still on the streets. I tell people when I'm traveling other places, that they haven't been in New York, well actually just America but not really just America, New York particularly, you can fill a five

room apartment overnight by just walking around the block. The same thing is true about getting enough...I mean if you work with "stuff" you can find enough "stuff". And you don't even have to do the kind of stuff I do. There is just enough stuff out there. The artists moving in and out...you can find perfectly good stretchers...some of them already with canvases on them!...you just have to paint them over...

##: I think, and in a good sense...you are back to your early 1960s way of doing assemblage.

RR: Everybody likes the early stuff. You have no idea how many times I am tempted, when all the bills come in...don't I have one more "early stuff". And I am the expert on my early stuff and I could make some...in fact there is a big collector that wants an "early stuff" and I have some "early stuff" that at some point, insanely, I thought it would be interesting if I took all my silkscreens and just, archivally, did another print and all that. Since then they've been through a couple of fires, a couple of hurricanes, and they are really looking old. The period that this collector was interested in was that period. So I wouldn't be absolutely lying if I just took that material from that period and just said, what...1961/85 or something? It is very tempting...he is offering money. That's a drag...that "early stuff" thing. I have to psychologically warp my morale to think that it is a compliment, but it is difficult, the older you get, to say "Aha, they still don't like the new stuff". Otherwise, pick up a paintbrush.

Do you do any theater or is it just straight painting? A lot of the conversations that I have had, I suppose because of the early days in Stockholm, where I guess mostly because the Countess, and the lack of interest in Europe, that an awful lot of very fine "stuff" went on here. And he thinks we are being refused everywhere...that good.

##: I think that we should not forget that Pontus was really one of the introducers of you and your generation from New York.

RR: I wasn't just from New York. He brought Tingelley into the picture. He was supportive of Falstrom and Utbeck and some others. He was really a very strong cultural muscle here.

##: I remember as a student at this very academy in the early '60s that he a very tough discussion...it was very controversial for even my generation of artists, to accept what Pontus was dealing with.

RR: He is still the most outstanding "fired" man as a museum director. He has held the best jobs in the world by now. Including the one that he really wanted right after he left here which was the job in Amsterdam at the Stedelijk. Anyway, he brought all these things like theater and writing and music all together. I even lost a couple of jobs because of him. I was fired from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company overnight because

we rode into town in Stockholm and there was these big signs out announcing the fact that Deborah Hay, myself, Steve Paxton and Barbara DillyLilly (actually, if you know that name it should be all you can do to not forget it...but it still is and she is married twice since too and just keeps getting bigger and bigger) and we were dancing at the museum. And Merce didn't know anything about it.

##: Do you know Swedish art now?

RR: I haven't seen much. I kept up to a point...disaster practically. As far as I was concerned, there was a whole period that lasted for years, in which I didn't care what anybody was doing in France or Italy and it really didn't matter too much because the energy was here. But since then I haven't been into a situation where you could just see that. Where would you think to go to see that? Don't say go to everybody's studios, I've done that. And you can't do that in two days either. What's a contemporary Swedish gallery here.

##: Erickson, Olsson, some of those galleries. It is very much open with very young gallery...
