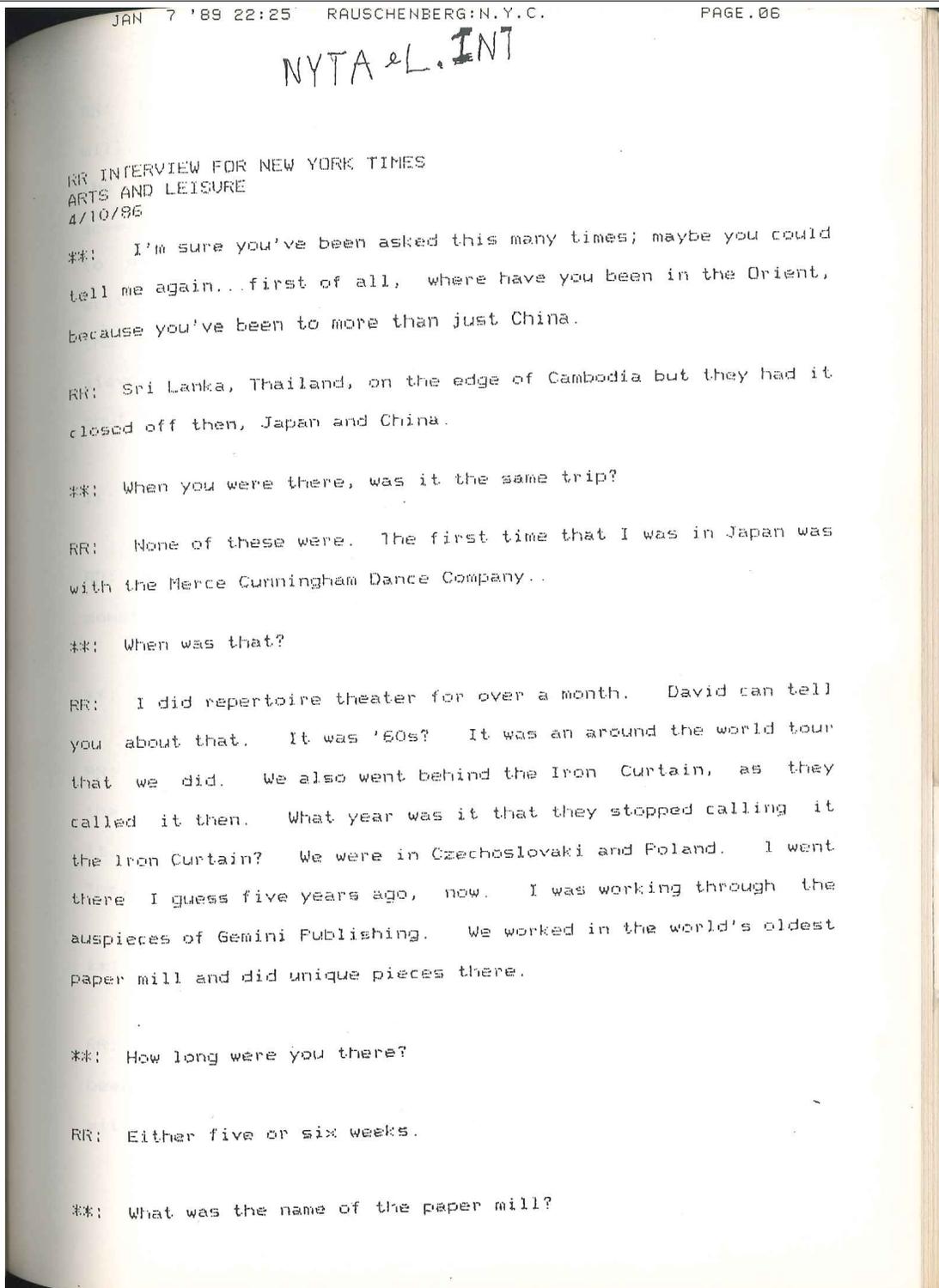


RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Bound Compilation of Robert Rauschenberg Interviews, 1985-1987/
Unidentified / Interview with Robert Rauschenberg / New York Times, 1986



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RR: They never would tell me. I never actually got to the paper mill, it was such a secret. I went to the town and they brought the paper and they gave me artists to work with but they had had some trouble with a couple of Japanese who had climbed the fence to steal the secret formula for the paper. Don Saff, who has written the Bible of contemporary print making, knew exactly what the secret was that they were trying to hide and it was a bamboo sieve. He had photographs of one and showed them to them. They shut the book immediately.

EE: What part of China was it in?

RR: Anhui Province. And I think the town was named Jen-seng or something.

EE: What interested you in the Chinese paper?

RR: The historic adventure of going there. This was considered the most important paper in the world and I would like to handle it. They did miraculous things that they had never done before. They did 32 ply and then a sheet as sheer as the finest silk.

EE: What is it about paper in general?

RR: Just the possibilities of making something. I've always been a "material man". Anything that I can touch is what I work with.

ENTER LEO CASTELLI AND ILEANA SONNABEND

##: Was your interest in the Orient something...it must have been something that went beyond just a particular paper.

RR: If you want to go right back to the start...I had the feeling that probably it's a cliché by now, but when I was feeling it...I felt that American painting had a lot more in common with Zen attitudes than...and Oriental philosophy, both in scale and the sense of uselessness that only could work in the Orient.

##: What do you mean by "uselessness"?

RR: Well, "uselessness"--that had no therapeutical practice. I think American painting ushered out Freud, that was like some nightmarish hangover from Europe.

##: When you say "uselessness" though, you certainly don't mean lack of meaning.

RR: Oh no, but impractical. A sense of religious impracticality.

##: When you talk about the connection with Zen...

RR: Zen is the Oriental highlight of noble foolishness.

##: Can you explain that at all?

RR: I just finished. Well, it's not a very well kept secret that John Cage is one of my very dearest friends and I spent three days on an early work of mine, when all I could afford was typewriter paper from the five and ten cent store and on a rainy afternoon, a Sunday, in the early '50s, maybe '51 or so, I used some library paste and pasted down as much paper as I could afford and I got John Cage to come down to Fulton Street with his model A and we did a print. I think there's more that...another Zen piece is this artist contemplating for one week, two weeks, it doesn't matter, at length, this empty piece of paper and while he's gone a chicken gets in the house and walks through the ink and across the paper. Now, I don't think that's unlike Pollock.

##: But your feeling about Zen might be different than what they were feeling about it wouldn't it?

RR: I don't know. If you're natural Zen you don't question that. That question doesn't come up. Zen is something that you can't explain. Except with a big bat. Just that question...you should have been hit over the head.

##: But some people would approach it as some kind of religious discipline.

RR: Yes. It doesn't...what I'm saying doesn't lack seriousness. In fact, even more, probably, dedication to concentration to remain useless. When I first came to New York, all you could hear was the purpose of red and green, you know. And gradually then energy became the...all the people that I knew were Europeans, and are just quickly American...like Rothko and Pollock and all those people. They were still trying to work that out. I mean, you could hear about Jung and Freud and guilt every night. Luckily beer was only 10 cents a glass, so you didn't waste a lot of time or money on listening to this...they were just discovering Zen then. And I think that Rothko went from doing surrealist details into wall size hunks of color.

LC: I think the Zen influence is really important.

RR: I do too. Some of those lectures at the Club were really ridiculous...to have Harold Rosenberg discussing Zen!

**): Who else lectured?

RR: Kiestler was there a lot. Marcel came once.

**): They didn't talk about Zen though.

RR: No, they each talked about their own thing.

**): And Rosenberg really talked about Zen?

LC: He was a universal mind and was incredibly articulate. He could talk wonderfully well also about something he didn't know anything about.

RR: He hated me and Jasper.

LC: And your father was around at that time.

RR: Who is your father?

***: My father's name was Theodore Brinson.

ENTER ILEANA

RR: You mean you're going to entertain us for several generations? What was that that Andy said? You only have fifteen minutes?

Antonio Homem: That was in the future.

AH: If Bob wants to say something we shouldn't hear, we'll just do a little ***.

RR: What a tease! Now I have to think of something that they don't want to hear...no, that I don't want them to hear.

RR: I'm not embarrassed, are you?

MM: No, I'm not.

RR: You've caught me at a really nice time not to be embarrassed because I've been embarrassed all afternoon...having my photograph taken in some of the most self-conscious situations that I've ever experienced. I know the photographs are terrible and I never want to see the guy again and I certainly don't want to see his work! It was not Maplethorpe, as long as he doesn't catch me in the shower!

MM: Did Merce have an interest in Zen also?

RR: Through John. But I think that a lot of his structure filtered through John, through the Orient, in dance. I mean, he certainly gave...I think that at the same time as Martha Graham, was symbolic and Freudian and representational of psychological trauma...Merce gave that up.

MM: So basically, as long as you can remember, there's always been some Oriental thought around for you.

RR: John said that that he had to study Zen and he was envious that I was "natural". But with no one being quite certain what Zen is, I don't know if that was ever, or is, a compliment. But we always felt an affinity with each other's activities, and still do. I didn't want this to be about John Cage if you know what I mean. What is your focus?

##: I've...it's really an article that is born out of an awareness of Oriental culture as part of art, completely. Maybe not completely, but it's much more widespread than I think anybody is aware of. I see it in so many kind of art. It's a subject that interests me and I'd like to pull it together.

RR: I found that, okay, I just finished an exhibition that over 50,000 people saw, in Lhasa...all Tibetans. We had to string off the pieces because they dealt with them religiously. Which meant that their desire was to smear yak butter on them. I never asked the insurance company about it, but I'm sure they would not approve.

##: What does it mean to smear yak butter on something?

RR: It's anything that is mysterious, religious or that makes you feel awe, is treated...that's the way you deal with this emotion. And they all carry, when they make their pilgrimages, carry a jar of yak butter.

##: But is that response to your work...

RR: It's a hell of a lot better than an analyst. It's immediate.

##: Does that response to your work suit your idea of religious

impracticality?

RR: I think so. If the first time that you have a confrontation with a work of art that you've never seen before, if one of these senses aren't aroused, then I think the artist has wasted both your time and his time. Don't you?

**: Yes, I do. How did you find the Orient, particularly China, compared with what you expected? Did you find it very different?

RR: I wasn't prepared for the slowness. I had a limited time to accomplish something that I wasn't certain of, which means that you might possibly run out of time. And the conditions of tedium which was constant, took some adjusting. Actually, when I left China that time when I was working at the paper factory, I went then to Japan and did some ceramics. Maybe tastelessly, I told them that I had just come from China and I thought that China and Japan had a lot in common. I had just left a place where everyone said "no" and I went to a place where "yes" was the only thing you could hear. But I noticed that nothing happened in either case. It was true, too. I don't know which was more frustrating.

**: I imagine that in certain circumstances, that kind of slowness would be very appealing.

RR: I can't imagine the circumstances.

##: Isn't that basically part of the Zen attitude?

RR: Unless you could take it off of the end, you know, where you say, okay, I had this much slow time, instead of dying right now I would like this time added as credit.

##: I think it's one of the things that would attract people.

RR: The slowness?

##: It's just a different concept of time.

RR: It's a resistance that comes out of fear though. And, it is changing now. But I think these changes are going to make so many more unknown difficulties that they can't simply be considered a development or improvement.

##: Some of your works, I was looking at some of the photographic works that you did there, they suggest that you feel somehow now there is an international culture. The juxtaposition of images...it could be Oriental, it could be Western. Is that what you feel?

RR: It's coming about. I think that the two last frontiers for any kind of international understanding and communicating, were sports and art. Now sports has been harnessed into the political structure of the country. And so I think that the last one is

art.

##: There are indications that that has been harnessed too, at some of the exhibitions that I have seen.

RR: Of theirs.

##: There was an exhibition of contemporary Chinese painting and however bad or inappropriate, it was sent over. I think there's an interest on their part in doing it.

RR: I saw both official artist paintings and unofficial artist paintings. Which is something that only be understood over there. The people who were doing the unofficial art felt threatened the whole time.

##: Do you like Chinese art? Do you like older Chinese art?

RR: Of course. The sense of space has a lot more in common with American art than does any sense of perspective that is created in Europe. Including Cubism even. I mean, Cubism is just the last refinement of the Renaissance.

##: Are you going to go back there?

RR: Yes. I got very frustrated working in Tibet because I had to...I could only stay there for a certain amount of time. Since then, since the opening at the National, I've been invited to

come back any time. But there has to be something quite unique in all kinds of experiences about being in a place where it takes five to seven days to get to the next town. And then back! But what ROCI is about, which is sponsoring (well, I'm the sponsor)...what it's about is the sharing of life habits. I was working in China and there was no way that anybody could have known what Mexico is like. And we take all that for granted. And I think our leaders tend to...END OF TAPE

##; The main discussions that you have had about Oriental culture have been with John Cage?

RR: Oh, not really. I spoke to (to TVB: How many people do you think there were in that hall?) it must have been two thousand artists. That was in Beijing. And they all asked questions and stuff. Also, I think I also did the first uncensored lecture on the last day of school at the National Academy of Fine Arts.

##: And they were interested?

RR: They were very interested. Some of the questions were a lot more sophisticated than I would ever have dreamed. I wasn't prepared for them. Such as wanting me to explain what Duchamp was about. You don't think that you're going to hang out in an art school in China and be asked that! They skipped lunch. Now, when a Chinaman skips lunch you know it's serious. They themselves say that if you're going to invade China, do it during

lunchtime. And that was the only time that I could get out and take photographs without an escort. I would just wait until lunch and I would just walk the streets. Because everybody was having lunch.

##: I meant in this country, in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, that you made whatever discussions you had about the Orient, primarily with John Cage.

RR: Sure.

##: It wasn't something that a lot of people were talking about. It was very private.

RR: No. But as Leo pointed out, the Club gave occasional lectures on the meaning of Zen, which is of course a contradiction already. And when you ask a Jew to explain the meaning of Zen, you're really in trouble. I hope that didn't sound like a racist remark, did it?

##: Not coming from you, no.

RR: One of my next stops is Israel.

##: Did that trip change you work in any way?

RR: Oh sure.

##: Could you say in any way how?

RR: I guess it was an opening of space.

##: Isn't that something to do with the slowness?

RR: I don't think so. I think...the copper paintings and all of that came out after...the images can float on top of other images and so it doesn't need an orientation. Interference, I've always used mirrors, from the very beginning...the Betty Parsons show was the first show where there...the sense of position, fixed position, is always irritated. I think traveling in the Orient has just reinforced that.

##: Is it just a feeling that you got there. Does it come from looking at the work?

RR: Both. If I was sure of anything, I would never tell.

##: Which is a Zen attitude.

RR: I'm not sure. You almost had me there!

##: They say that anything that's worth explaining, shouldn't be explained.

RR: Yes.

**: Well, thank you.

RR: Questions are always much more interesting than answers.
Answers is the funeral facts.

**: Do you remember exactly when the trip was?

TVB: The first trip was in '81.

RR: That's the trip to the paper mill.

**: That was when you went to Tibet and Thailand?

TVB: No, that was just in November of 1985.

**: Where did you go on that trip?

TVB: The last trip was Lhasa, Tibet and Beijing. The trip
before was kind of all over the place.

RR: This was quite nice. I've enjoyed talking to you. Did you
find out anything that you really would like to have known?

**: Yes. Are you going to be around? When are you going back
to Florida?

RR: I'm going to San Antonio tomorrow. I'm the Sesquicentennial

artist for Texas. And so I'm making my Texas tour. They've been very sweet to me in Texas. I was sort of thinking that I should be a Texas artist. The Texans are talking about putting up a big wall around Texas and it would be longer, if it goes where they want it to, it would be longer than the Great Wall. That's what they say. Anyway, I was thinking that maybe we could do another kind of civil war number and you would have to get your Rauschenbergs from Texas now, because they've been so sweet to me.

LC: He's an awfully nice guy. Here's a present for you. I didn't get all the money, I got half of it. There is fifteen more for you because of the painting that sold in Houston.

RR: See? Let's all move to Texas. We can keep our businesses up here...