

Stories Project. ACC 54.

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Jeff Slayton is a dancer, choreographer, and author who met Robert Rauschenberg while a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in the late 1960s. Slayton later danced with the Viola Farber Dance Company—and also married Farber—during which he performed in Farber’s *Brazos River* (1977), produced for television by the Fort Worth Art Museum and KERA Channel 13, Dallas/Fort Worth with set, costumes, and video editing by Rauschenberg.

Transcription of phone interview with Slayton conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on June 6, 2023. Reviewed and edited by the speakers.

David White [DW]: I’m David White at the Rauschenberg Foundation, and I’m speaking with Jeff Slayton, and today is June 6, 2023. And Jeff, if you would say a little about yourself to get us underway? Where you’re from or your education, a little about your dancing, choreography and that sort of thing, just so people know who they’re listening to.

Jeff Slayton [JS]: Okay. Well, my name is Jeff Slayton, and I was born in Virginia and started dancing at the age of eight to strengthen a weak leg. Actually, I had hip dysplasia and wore braces. So, the reason I started dancing was a health issue, and I ended up being good at it and fell in love with it. I moved to New York in 1966, actually to go to school at Adelphi University, which is in Garden City, Long Island. I was twenty-one at the time. I had tried another college which didn’t work out. And it was at Adelphi University where I met Viola Farber, who was teaching there part-time. I danced in a piece by her called *Here They Come Now*, which was a kind of musical chairs theme. At the end of that year, she suggested that I go to New York to take a workshop at the Merce Cunningham Studio, which I did. I never went back to Adelphi. Merce offered me a full scholarship at the studio, and then one of those rare New York stories: I think it was less than two months later I was in the company.

DW: Wow. So this is 1966?

JS: Well, it was ‘67 when I actually joined the company, because it was after a year of being at Adelphi. And I was so naive, David, I didn’t know what that really entailed, and I had only seen the company perform once.

DW: Wow.

JS: Right. And I joined the company on the same day as Meg Harper, who was in the company for many years.

DW: And Viola was in the company at this point?

JS: No, she had left. She left in 1965, I believe, after thirteen years.

DW: Oh, okay.

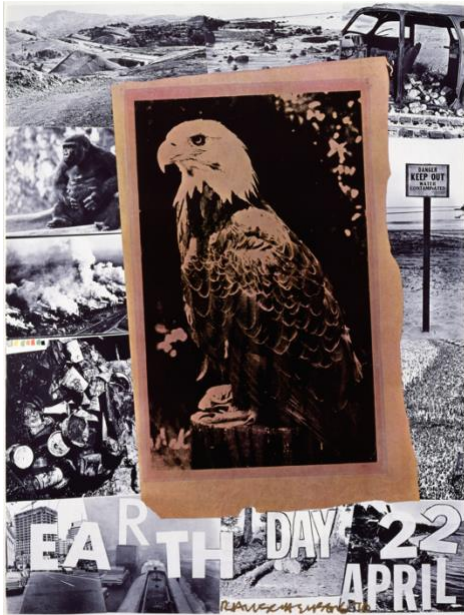
JS: Yeah. So she was teaching part-time and I was with Merce for only three years. I don't think I met Robert Rauschenberg during that time because Jasper Johns was the artistic director at the time.

DW: Oh, okay. Great, because that was one of my questions, if Bob was the artistic director when you were there. So he had moved on and it was Jasper?

JS: Yeah, it was Jasper at the time, and I met Bob later. I danced with Merce for three years, and I had to buy a book on artists because I was suddenly meeting and having dinner with all these people, like Jasper Johns and Marcel Duchamp. I met Duchamp in Buffalo, New York with Merce's *Walkaround Time* [premiered at Buffalo State College, State University of New York, March 10, 1968], and Frank Stella and Leo Castelli, all these people. I had no idea who they were. And so I went out and bought an art history book to educate myself on who I was spending time with. And living in New York after being raised in Richmond, Virginia was quite a . . . I felt at home, actually. I felt more at home in New York than I did in Virginia. But in 1969, Viola started her own company, Viola Farber Dance Company, and she asked me to do a duet with a woman named Mirjam Berns. And I left Merce's company in 1970 because Viola's work felt more natural to my way of dancing. Probably career-wise it was not the greatest move, but artistically it's how I related to dance.

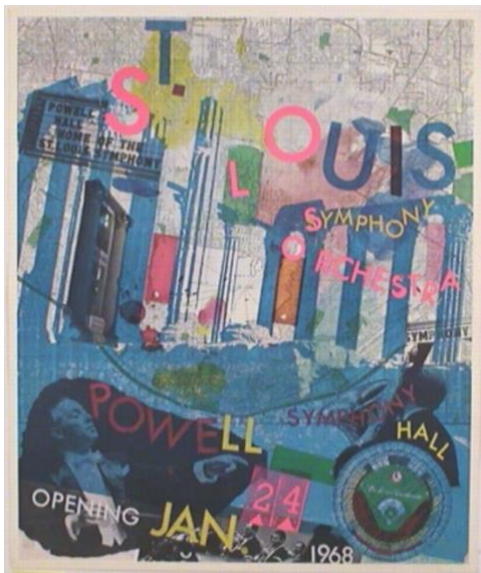
DW: No, no, you made the right choice, it seems.

JS: I think so, for me, I did. And in 1971 I heard myself asking Viola to marry me. And to my surprise, she said yes. And it was a love of dance. We did love each other, but it was not your normal marriage. It was really a dance marriage. And it was during that time that I met Robert Rauschenberg, because they were friends and we started meeting him for dinner. There was one dinner that—this is the dinner I was talking about with you earlier. I can't remember all the people who were there, but it was a huge table. It was in New York, and I believe at Rauschenberg's home in New York. It was a very large table, and it was full. I believe Merce was there, Merce Cunningham, and I don't know if Jasper was there or not. Viola and I were there, I think John Cage was there. And Bob, as we called him, had a little bit too much to drink that night, and he gave us all these posters. I have one that's *Earth Day Poster* (1970). It's got a big eagle in the middle and a gorilla on the side.



Robert Rauschenberg
Earth Day, April 22 Poster, 1970
Offset lithograph
33 3/4 x 25 1/4 inches (85.7 x 64.1 cm)
Poster for the benefit of the American Environment
Foundation From an edition of 10,300 of which 300 were
signed, published by Castelli Graphics, New York
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
RRF 70.E017

And then a *St. Louis Symphony Orchestra Poster* (1968). And he signed them, or he had signed them before we got there. When he handed them to us, he said, “I don’t think I’ve signed these.” And we said, “Yes, Bob, you have.” And he said, “Well, I’m going to sign them again.” So, my posters have his signature over top of his signature, and I think there are not that many of those. But anyway, that was a very funny story with Bob.



Robert Rauschenberg
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra Poster, 1968
Offset lithograph
31 x 26 inches (78.7 x 66 cm)
RRF 68.E003

DW: And do you recall what year this was?

JS: Well, I was still married to Viola, so I don’t know. It’s probably the mid or early seventies.

DW: So, at that point, he would already be at this present building that I'm calling you from, 381 Lafayette Street [the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation headquarters in New York].

JS: Right. So if you know those dates, then you can narrow it down somewhat.

DW: Right. Prior to that, he had a loft up across from Grace Church on Broadway [New York]. There was a very long table there, I've seen pictures of it. I don't know if it was a Thanksgiving meal or something other, but I imagine he did the same thing in the Lafayette Street space as well.



Thanksgiving dinner in Robert Rauschenberg's Broadway studio, New York, 1965. Photo: Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs

JS: I remember Viola and I walked there. We lived at the time in the West Village area. So I think at that time we were living on . . . Oh gosh, what was the name of that street? It was a one-block street. My memory is gone, but it was in the West Village and it was a railroad apartment. You came in the kitchen and you walked through the whole apartment to get to the living room.

DW: Right, I know that kind exactly.

JS: Yeah. And so then the biggest story I have about Bob is that in 1977 he did the costumes for a film that Viola choreographed called *Brazos River* (1977).



Detail from a contact sheet documenting the making of Viola Farber's *Brazos River* (1977), a video collaboration with Robert Rauschenberg and David Tudor, produced by the Fort Worth Art Museum and filmed at KERA-TV Channel 13, Dallas–Fort Worth studios, December 1976. Photos: unattributed. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



Still from Viola Farber's *Brazos River* (1977), a video collaboration with Robert Rauschenberg and David Tudor. Dancers pictured, from left to right, are Jeff Slayton, André Peck, and Willi Feuer. Produced for television by the Fort Worth Art Museum and KERA-TV Channel 13, Dallas–Fort Worth, aired February 1977. Audiovisual collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

DW: Right.

JS: And it had music by David Tudor. And although he had his name taken off of it, Alvin Lucier also did music for it. And Bob did the costumes. They were all beautiful pastel colors, and I think each dancer had three or four costumes for this film, and we were constantly changing them. The director was Dan Parr. I don't know if you have this information already.

DW: It may well be in the [Robert Rauschenberg Foundation] archive someplace, but I'm not familiar with that name myself.

JS: Yeah. It was a film that was not seen very much. So I actually, a couple years ago, went to Fort Worth, Texas, the Museum of Modern Art, which is where this film was actually recorded

in 1977, and showed the film there. I got permission from everybody and showed the film there, and it had not been seen since 1977.

DW: Oh.

JS: Yeah. The dancers in it were Jumay Chu, Larry Clark, Viola Farber, Willi Feuer, June Finch, Anne Koren, and Susan Matheke. And André Peck and myself, Jeff Slayton. We were in Fort Worth for a week, and stayed in a hotel in Dallas. Maybe we were there two weeks. I'm not really clear, but we danced during the day and in the evening, Bob and Viola and David Tudor and Alvin Lucier went to an editing room, which I was not part of. I don't even remember where it was because I never went there. They only wanted to be there by themselves. And they put the film together, and I think it's a beautiful film. Viola did not like it because Bob made it look like one of his paintings, which is gorgeous. We were constantly changing costumes, so in the middle of a movement, the costumes would change color.

DW: So that had to do with the editing, that, all of a sudden it was—

JS: Yes. And he really . . . He sort of ripped the dance apart and put it together in all the wrong order, and so Viola felt that her dance was not really seen as it was made to be seen.

DW: Right.

JS: But I personally always thought it was a gorgeous film. And it isn't a real dance film. It's a piece of art by all those people who made it. But it really does look like a moving Rauschenberg painting more than it does a dance film. And it caused a bit of a rift between Viola and Bob for a while.

DW: I'd heard that part, that there was a rift because of how it ended up looking. So, it was conceived to be a film from the start, is that correct?

JS: Yes. It was a dance film, and the museum took one of its galleries and they put a dance floor down, not a wooden floor. It was a Marley on cement, which meant it was very difficult to dance on. But we did it. And there were, I think, three cameras and black curtains all the way around all four walls. And we basically did that dance over and over and over and over again for that week.

DW: So then there was a lot of footage which then got presumably cut down to the final—

JS: Yeah, a lot of it ended up on the floor somewhere. I don't know if anyone—I know Viola did not, but I don't know if anyone else kept that footage, whether the museum did or whether Dan

Parr, who was the director. He may have had some. I don't have that information, but I do know when I . . . Go ahead.

DW: Well, just it's interesting for me to wonder what the director would do if Viola has choreographed the work and thinks it should be this. I guess the director would then decide what cameras were turned on or . . . Well, it's an interesting collaboration, for sure. And complicated.

JS: Yeah, it was complicated because Viola said it was the first time she really came in contact with male chauvinism. She was the only female in the room. And also, as you well know, Bob Rauschenberg had a much bigger name.

DW: Sure.

JS: I think the director was in awe of him, rightly so. That's my personal feeling about it, and from what Viola told me at the time. And she would come back to the hotel crying.

DW: Oh, dear.

JS: Yeah, that her dance was being destroyed. And she did not keep a copy of it. When I showed it in Fort Worth, I actually had to send out word and finally found a copy with the woman who was the head of the museum at the time.

DW: Was that Anne Livet?

JS: Yes, that's how I found a copy of it: Anne.

DW: Oh, through Anne, right. Interesting.

JS: Through Anne, yeah.

DW: Now, did you go to the Rauschenberg retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art called *Rauschenberg Among Friends*, which was in 2017 [*Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 21–Sept. 17, 2017]?

JS: No, I was not there. I went to a big exhibit of his here in Los Angeles [Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Rauschenberg: The 1/4 Mile*, Oct. 28, 2018–June 9, 2019], but not the one in New York.

DW: Because at the New York venue, one of the galleries had works from the seventies, works called *Jammers* (1975–76), fabric pieces that are often just pinned to the wall. And they had a monitor on one of the walls which was screening the *Brazos River* film.

JS: Okay. Well, at the end of the film, as the credits were going, Bob had us stand in a circle and we threw the leotard that was pink, and then somebody else would throw a leotard that was red, and we did this at random, and then I would throw my tights that were gray. So, we made a work of art right there as the camera was rolling.

DW: That is my recollection of all these various colored fabrics coming together.

JS: Right. Yeah. And we did that. He just said, “Whenever you feel like, throw one in.” And that’s what happened while the credits were rolling at the end of the film.

DW: It’s all very fascinating.

JS: Yes, it was a wonderful experience. It was hard to dance on that floor. And I don’t know if you’ve ever been around when they’re filming dance, but you stand for a long time, and then when the angles are right, they say, “Okay, dance.” And you’ve been standing around for half an hour, and you get cold and suddenly you have to dance. But we did it. And I think if you ever get a chance to see the full film, I think it’s worth it.

DW: Now, just to go back, you mentioned when Viola, in 1969, started her own company, you mentioned a dancer named, Mirjam Berns.

JS: Right. She was an independent dancer. She danced with Dan Wagoner, she did her own choreography, and she actually became much more well known in France. She moved to France and became a big choreographer, and she’s now living in South America. And she’s from the Netherlands. And if you speak to her, the language comes out in Dutch, English, French, and Spanish. She’s very fluent in all of those languages, but she can’t speak a sentence in one language, it seems. In English anyway.

DW: I’ve heard about that from other people as well.

JS: Yeah.

DW: Each sentence includes all the languages.

JS: Right. Because I think she learned it all by ear. She didn’t study them. You know?

DW: Yeah. So at the period when you got to know Bob, did you and Viola see him often or was it—

JS: No, no, no. We would have dinner once in a while, but it was never a close friendship. Viola told me that when she was with the Cunningham company, she would hang out with Bob and Jasper a lot. And then the relationship between those two, Bob and Jasper, broke up.

DW: Right.

JS: And I think Viola was stuck in the middle, but they all adored her.

DW: I certainly knew that from whenever I remember hearing Bob speak of her. He was tremendously fond of her and just thought her dancing was magnificent.

JS: Oh, she was quite the creature, quite the woman, yeah. She spoke three languages. She could speed read, she would read a novel a night. She rarely slept. And she was this choreographer and an amazing intellect as well. So I always felt a little intimidated around her.

DW: Well, I look forward to reading *The Prickly Rose*. [*The Prickly Rose: A Biography of Viola Farber* was written by Slayton in 2006.]

JS: Oh, yeah. Well, when you get to the chapter, “Lady of the Leaves,” get a box of Kleenex. That’s about her death.

DW: Oh, dear.

JS: She had a cerebral hemorrhage and was found early in the morning outside, rolling around in a pile of leaves. It was like October, November, and she knew her name, but she didn’t know what year it was or where she was. She then had a second cerebral hemorrhage, which eventually killed her. So that’s a sad story. But it was the people at a church that we used to go to who named her “Our Lady of the Leaves.”

DW: Nice name. Actually, there’s an installation of work that was just installed recently here on Lafayette Street of Rauschenberg’s artwork using black or white, or both black and white. And one of them is a 1963 silkscreen painting that had belonged to Viola at one point [Untitled, 1963]. And there was an exhibition of the silkscreen paintings at the Whitney Museum [*Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Dec. 7, 1990–March 17, 1991]. And the catalogue was almost like the catalogue raisonné of those works. And they pretty much thought they’d included all of them. And it wasn’t until after the exhibition opened, the catalogue was printed—maybe it was at the time after Viola had

died—that this work became known to us, I guess, through an auction. And the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation was able to acquire it.



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled, 1963
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas
30 x 40 inches (76.2 x 101.6 cm)
RRF 63.036

JS: That was because of me. She left me everything, and that painting was part of what I inherited from her. I had it cleaned because she was a chain smoker.

DW: That always amazes me about dancers.

JS: I know. I was the same. Not anymore. But I had it cleaned and I sold it because I was at a low point in my financial career.

DW: It has a very good home.

JS: Well, I'm glad.

DW: We love having it, because at that point, most of the ones that Rauschenberg had made had been sold. And there's only one other one that's still in the Foundation's possession. And it has that image, as you well know, of Viola [Robert Rauschenberg, Untitled [Cunningham dancers], 1961]. They're separate images, but one of Steve Paxton and Carolyn Brown and—

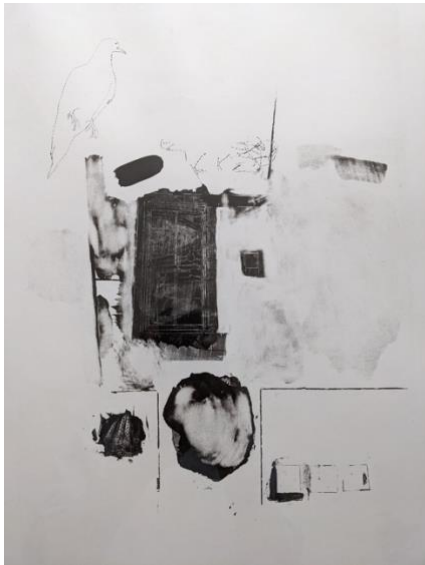


Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled [Cunningham dancers], 1961
Contact print
2 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches (5.7 x 5.7 cm)
RRF 61.P005
Pictured from left to right: Steve Paxton, Carolyn Brown, Judith Dunn, Marilyn Wood, Viola Farber and Shareen Blair (on floor)

JS: Right.

DW: From photographs that Bob had taken.

JS: Yeah, I have another Rauschenberg, it's an artist's proof [for *Abby's Bird*, 1962], and it's got a dove on it, and it's just all white, except the dove is made of lines drawn like dashes. And I've never seen the completed version, what it actually ended up being.



Robert Rauschenberg
Abby's Bird, 1962
Lithograph
Artist's proof for an edition of 50, published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York
27 7/8 x 22 inches (70.9 x 56 cm)
RRF 62.E001.AP6

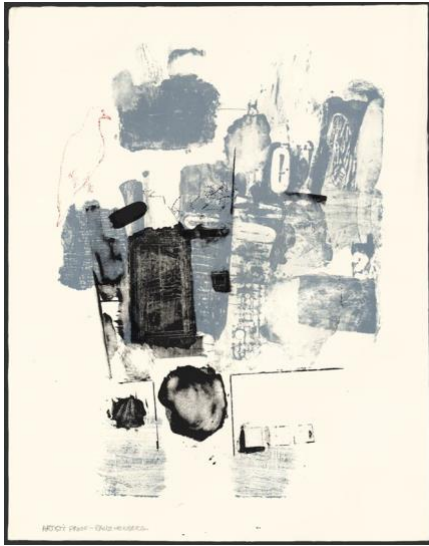
DW: Actually, I'd be curious if at some point, if you have a camera in your phone or something that could take a picture and send it.

JS: Sure.

DW: We're always curious to find out about things that left the studio and went to somebody without going through the Castelli registering system.

JS: Right.

JS: Someone told me at one point that the bird ended up being red, but I'm not sure because I've never seen it.



Robert Rauschenberg
Abby's Bird, 1962
Lithograph
23 x 18 inches (58.4 x 45.6 cm)
From an edition of 50, published by Universal Limited Art
Editions, West Islip, New York
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Universal Limited Arts
Editions
RRF 62.E001

Well, there's only one other story I have about Bob, but it's not really about him. It's about Leo Castelli. There was a showing of Bob's at the Castelli Gallery, and Viola and I were invited to the opening, and this, again, had to be like '75, '76. And we had just bought these matching jackets that were leather, suede leather. And for us it was really expensive at the time. They weren't, but to us they were. And we went to Leo Castelli's gallery, and you had to have an invitation. You had to sign in and sign out when you left. And we had a wonderful time there talking to Bob and all these people. I think Lois Long was still alive.

DW: I would think so then.

JS: Yeah. And we went to leave. We had put our jackets where we were told, and mine was missing, and it was never found. We had checked in at the desk because everybody had to check in and out. They refused to acknowledge anything. And we contacted Leo Castelli and he just said, "Too bad."

DW: Whoa.

JS: Yes. And Bob had no idea about it, so it was nothing against him, but it was the security around that. We felt safe, but it turned out not to be.

DW: What a strange story.

JS: That was my only other. I know.

DW: I've never been aware of one that had that kind of, where you checked in and you checked out kind of thing. Usually there's a bar where you could hang your coat if you wanted to put it someplace, but . . . Huh? Wow.

JS: Yeah. And I had stupidly put my wallet in there and our keys to the apartment.

DW: Oh dear. Well, not so stupid if you thought it was being protected.

JS: Right. So we had to get a locksmith to open our door, our apartment door. It cost us a lot of money. But anyway.

DW: I'm sorry to hear that story. In one sense it's fascinating, but awful.

JS: Yeah. So those are my stories about Robert Rauschenberg.

DW: Well, good.

JS: I met him once again at the American Dance Festival. This must have been . . . I was there from 1988 to '96, and I think it might have been 1996 because Viola had just been there with me. And I saw Bob in the audience and went and said hello. That was my last contact with him.

DW: Well, I can't thank you enough for your coming up with these stories and being part of this. If you're ever in New York, certainly don't hesitate to contact me or ring the doorbell and come by. Well, then I think we're done. And thank you very, very much. It's been a pleasure to speak with you, Jeff, I must say.

JS: Thank you. Same here. And glad to be part of history.

DW: Good. Okay.

JS: All right. Thank you, David.

DW: Okay. Bye, Jeff. Thank you.