

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Ken Elliott

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ken Elliott conducted by Sara Sinclair and Christine Frohnert on May 4, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Ken Elliott

Location: Mount Vernon, New York

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair (Q) and
Christine Frohnert (Q2)

Date: May 4, 2015

Q: This is Sara Sinclair. It's May 4th. We are sitting at the Rauschenberg warehouse in Mount Vernon, New York. I'm here today with—

Elliott: Kenneth Elliott.

Q: Thanks for being here.

Elliott: Thanks for having me.

Q: To begin, will you just tell us where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

Elliott: I was born in 1949 in Marietta, Georgia. In my early years, my family moved to Jonesboro, Georgia and that was where my elementary school years were spent. In 1963, my family moved to Stuart, Florida. I spent all my teen years and early years in Stuart, Florida and moved to Tampa, Florida in 1969.

Q: What was Stuart, Florida like?

Elliott: It was a beautiful place to grow up. It was a part of Florida that hadn't been overly developed at that time, so the beach was very accessible. I could ride my bicycle out there and it was a great place to hang out as a teenager. There weren't a lot of adults around. There were a lot of beach activities: snorkeling, fishing. It was great.

Q: You spent most of your time outside?

Elliott: A lot of it, especially at that time, yes.

Q: How did you discover art?

Elliott: I think I discovered art when I was probably in kindergarten. I had a knack for drawing things that seemed to impress adults and other kids and it's just something that seemed to be a natural progression. I was drawing a lot in elementary school. I lost interest in it a little bit in the teen years; sports took over for a while, but I was taking art classes in high school as well. After graduating from high school, the interest just came on again. So I tried going to what was, at that time, called the Atlanta College of Art, before it moved into the High Museum of Art [Atlanta], and finally merged with SCAD [Savannah College of Art and Design, Georgia] in 2006. I applied and I was accepted. I was not prepared to be away from home at that point. I was the first of my family to go to any kind of college and while I did well there, I was not emotionally prepared for Atlanta, compared to Stuart, Florida. I wound up coming back to Stuart and went to a community college for a couple of years.

Q: What had re-ignited your interest in art?

Elliott: Probably my high school art teacher, Charlotte Wilmoth. She saw that I had a little talent and she encouraged me and it just regenerated. I was always looking at art books. Supposedly I would go to the library to study, but instead I would go to the art section and start flipping through the art books and magazines.

Q: Do you remember some of your favorite books from that time?

Elliott: I remember some of the artists I was most impressed with at that time: Winslow Homer and Paul Gauguin and [Vincent] van Gogh. It wasn't until going to Atlanta that I really began to be aware of the more contemporary artists.

Q: What were you doing for your art teacher in high school? Were you drawing or painting?

Elliott: Drawing and making small ceramic sculptures.

Q: Okay. All right, so tell me about coming back to the community college in Florida.

Elliott: Well, I continued to take art classes there. I had a painting instructor, James

Ravoira, who was quite a character, and he encouraged me in my work. I just continued to do art until deciding finally to go to the University of South Florida [USF, Tampa] after community college.

Q: How did you decide to go to University of South Florida?

Elliott: I had friends who were there and I had heard a little bit about the art department; not a lot, but I knew that it was reputed to have a good art department and it wasn't so focused on sports. It had more of an academic focus than say FSU [Florida State University, Tallahassee] or the University of Florida. That had begun to be my focus.

Q: Yes. You said that arriving in Tampa you were introduced to new artists and new art. Do you remember some of those early impressions?

Elliott: Yes I do. I first met Robert Rauschenberg when I was a student at USF. I was taking sculpture classes from Alan Eaker, who was working with Bob through Graphicstudio [Institute of Research in Art, USF] on the *Tampa Clay Pieces* [1972–73] at the time. I had been doing some clay pieces that were imitation wood boxes, only they were ceramic; Alan came and got me and said, "You need to meet Bob Rauschenberg." So he introduced me to Bob and I was dumbstruck. And I don't know that I had anything much to say. He shook my hand and I looked at the work that he was doing. It was an impressive moment for me.

Q: What was the work that he was working on at the time?

Elliott: Well, the *Tampa Clay Pieces* were trompe l'œil crushed cardboard boxes; they had labels on them and little staples. They were very “fool the eye.” Looking at them, you would have thought they were crumpled cardboard boxes, but they were clay ceramics.



Robert Rauschenberg
Tampa Clay Piece 3, 1972–73
Fired and glazed ceramic with tape and
silkscreened decal
19 1/2 x 24 x 5 1/2 inches (49.5 x 61 x 14 cm)
From an edition of 10 Roman numerals and 10
Arabic numerals, published by Graphicstudio,
University of South Florida, Tampa

Q: Had you been familiar with his work?

Elliott: A little bit. What I've since realized is that I didn't realize how much his work influenced a lot of young artists my age. We look at the art magazines or the televised information about art and see what's going on, but without really realizing just what an influence he was at that time. There are certain ideas that seemed to be in the air or that began to be allowed because people like him were making new art in a way that enabled you to look at things in a different way than traditionally art had been looked at before.

Q: What do you think some of those ideas are, that Bob's work then facilitated?

Elliott: I can give an example. It's like looking at a fire hydrant and you have a concept of a fire hydrant. But if you look at it in a different way, it's so much more. It becomes sculptural and there's a whole history and a life that it refers to, other than just, "Oh, it's a fire hydrant." When you've twisted your vision just a little bit, to look at it a different way, it makes it a lot more than just that object.

Q: And [Donald] Don Saff was one of your teachers while you were at USF, yes?

Elliott: No, he was the dean of fine arts while I was there. He and Alan Eaker were at Graphicstudio at that point. I studied with Alan Eaker. Don saw a lot of the artwork from students that professors considered to be worth looking at, so I know that Don saw some of my work from that time.

Q: What of your work did he see?

Elliott: One piece would have been these sculptural ceramics I had done. They were tall pyramid shapes with discs on top, in a row of five, about this high. While the clay was still wet, I shot a shotgun slug through the progression of discs so that it captured the initial impact of the first disc, progressing through the last disc, like stop-action photography on a physical thing. That was in the student show and there was another piece with filleted fishing lures.

[Laughter]

Elliott: It was painted wooden fishing lures and a little old pedestal, a cutting board, with the filleted pieces on one side of the cutting board, on a piece of wax paper, and newspaper over here with what would be the bones of the fishing lures, the hooks, and just a bare bulb hanging down from the ceiling overhead. I can certainly see where Bob would have been an influence in that work, although I wouldn't have known it at the time.

Q: So will you tell me how you came to work for Don Saff and got involved with ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] in 1985?

Elliott: In 1985, I guess Don was starting his second tenure at Graphicstudio. They were starting to need people to edition the ROCI sculptures that were editioned at Graphicstudio. I had the connection with Alan Eaker and my friend, Nick Conroy, a contemporary in the art department at that time, was also hired, as was another friend, Bill Robinson, who has always been really close with Don and Alan and the art department. Bill operated the art shop at USF. We had all been in contact for a long time. When the job came up, Nick and Bill told me about it and I interviewed with [Mary Susan] Susie Hennessy and there you go.

Q: How was the project itself articulated to you? How was ROCI explained?

Elliott: Bob was traveling around the world doing exhibitions in countries that were—I don't know how you would say it—on the edge, where there were social issues and maybe some tension with the United States. The project was to bridge gaps and build communication between

those cultures, those people and ours. These particular sculptures arose out of visits to Chile [*Araucan Mastaba / ROCI CHILE*, 1986], Japan [*Bamhue / ROCI JAPAN*, 1987], and Tibet [*Tibetan Garden Song / ROCI TIBET*, 1986]; there was one for Italy, but the venue never materialized, which was *Fifth Force* [1986]. There was a lot of other work that was done, but those were the four that I got to be involved with at Graphicstudio.

Q: When you were interviewing for the position, was there already a sense of the kind of work and the kind of materials that they were asking you to come on board for?

Elliott: Yes, because the pieces arose out of Bob creating these works out of his experiences of those countries, we knew what the images were going to be. It was just a matter of turning them into a format that would work as multiples, as edition pieces. That was our job.

Q: Is that something you had previously done?

Elliott: No, not like that. I'd worked with ceramics and all kinds of sculpture. I'm sure that one of the qualifications for being hired in Graphicstudio was to have a range of abilities. I'd taken printmaking intaglio from John Catterall, ceramics from Eaker and Charles [J.] Fager, and painting from George Pappas. Don wanted people who could do a lot of things so that you could be moved from one project to the next, not solely focused on one particular medium or point of view.

Q: So what was the feeling for you when you were beginning this project? It must have felt like a lot of new challenges.

Elliott: Yes, it was exciting. It was rejuvenating and that's also when I realized how much influence Bob had had on the art world and on young artists in particular. Things like fire hydrants or street signs and incorporating everyday elements into art; not that it would have to be representational, but instead become the meanings that are in those things themselves.

Q: All right, well, let's pause for a second and we'll get you to talk about some of those initial works.

Elliott: Okay.

[Laughter]

Q2: This is Christine Frohnert, conservator of contemporary art. I would like to address technical questions and get some insight into the production processes as well. First of all, do you have ideas about what inspired Bob Rauschenberg to create *Tibetan Garden Song*, which was created for ROCI Tibet in 1986?

Elliott: I have no idea. [Laughs] He was just fascinated with the found object and the beauty of it. This is the original unique sculpture that was used to inspire the edition pieces [*Song for Tibetan Saga / ROCI TIBET*, 1985]. The edition pieces look quite different because the cellos do not

have the patina and the age on them that this unique one does, so this looks considerably different. The edition piece has a scroll brush hanging here instead of a brick. The tub is chrome-plated rather than just galvanized and it's complete here rather than being so fragmented. The piece is also filled with glycerin up to this line. Originally I believe Bob was happy with that, without it being covered, so that any dust, any debris, whatever got in there became part of the piece. I think he called that "free drawing," when an accident would add to the work.



left: Robert Rauschenberg
Song for Tibetan Saga / ROCI TIBET,
1985
Assembled construction with glycerin
47 1/2 x 22 inches (120.7 x 55.9 cm)
diameter
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

right: Robert Rauschenberg
Cello, chrome-plated wash tub, glycerin,
Chinese scrollmaker's brush, and
mirrored Plexiglas
43 x 18 1/4 inches (109.2 x 46.4 cm)
diameter
From an edition of 25, produced by
Graphicstudio, University of South
Florida, Tampa; only 20 realized

Q2: That sounds like him. I'm interested in the production process. Did he already have a solid idea what the piece should look like? As you mentioned, you exchanged the brick with the brush—how did it start?

Elliott: I believe that he and Don Saff had already discussed what the changes would be. I was just given the parameters of what the piece was and how it was to be made. So the galvanized tubs had to be stripped and chrome-plated. First of all, I had to find all the same tubs that all

looked alike. That was a matter of going around to a lot of different hardware stores to find this one particular tub that was manufactured by Wheeling. Wheeling had gone out of business, but the tubs were available in certain hardware stores, if you could find them, so we would buy them up, two or three or four at a time, until we got enough for the edition. Then we had to find a plater who could actually chrome-plate the tub because it's such thin metal. It was really a trick to get the plating to take without burning through the metal.

The edition piece cellos were unfinished cellos that were purchased in China. They came in these little green canvas cases. Nick and I would take the cellos out and sand them. We had an epoxy resin that was very good for being submerged. It would not break down under water. The pieces were coated in that so that they wouldn't absorb the glycerin once they were put in the tub full of glycerin.

Q2: The tape is marking the line for the glycerin?

Elliott: Yes. On this unique artwork it's a blue line; on the edition pieces, it's a red line that's painted there. The cello has to be weighted so there's a mirror in the bottom of this tub and under the mirror there was a lead weight that was connected to the bottom of the cello, to hold it down in the glycerin. Otherwise it would just pop up out of it and would not look the way it should.

Q2: There's also a threaded pin or a threaded screw that is providing support from underneath?

Elliott: Yes, there's this bolt that bolts into the bottom of the cello and holds it down to the lead weight.

Q2: If I understood correctly, only the bottom part up to the tape was coated with epoxy?

Elliott: Yes, but on the edition pieces, the whole cello was coated with a sealer and I believe they were totally coated with this one particular epoxy. Although, now that I'm thinking about it, there was a different product above the water line because the epoxy in the bottom of the tub would not oxidize in the glycerin. We wanted a different sealer, a polyurethane product, I think, to seal the cello on the top, so it wouldn't oxidize and discolor over time.

Q2: Do you remember what made you change from the brick to the brush in the edition pieces?

Elliott: That would be a question for Bob.

[Laughter]

Q2: The edition was originally planned for 25 works. Only 20 were realized. Do you remember why you stopped producing them?

Elliott: Bob was moving on to the ROCI USA project. Don Saff had decided to do something like Graphicstudio as a private endeavor. He founded Saff Tech Arts [Oxford, Maryland]. Bob decided that since he was going to start working with Saff Tech Arts and wanted to go full steam

on the *ROCI USA* [*Wax Fire Works*], 1990–91; series includes unique and editioned works] project, that this was enough, so that’s where the ROCI sculpture stopped.

Q2: That makes sense. Did Bob want to use glycerin from day one?

Elliott: Yes, yes. That was what was in the original.

Q2: Maybe now we can turn to look at *Fifth Force*, which was created in 1985–86. This is quite an impressive combination of different materials and I’m curious to know more about the production process, but also if you have anything to share about the possible inspiration for the piece, that would be wonderful.



Robert Rauschenberg
Fifth Force, 1986
Bronze, acrylic paint, Xerox transfer on silk, waxed thread, painted shot with stainless steel pin
83 1/4 x 15 x 45 inches (211.5 x 38.1 x 114.3 cm)
From an edition of 25 published by Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa; only 12 realized

Elliott: I’ve heard Don talk about Bob doing what we call the “shirt cardboards” [note: *North African Collages* (1952), a series of collages made by Rauschenberg on cardboard from

laundered shirts] and one of the humorous things was to straighten the Leaning Tower of Pisa; just take the page and straighten it up [Untitled (Tower of Pisa), ca. 1952]. In order to incorporate it into this piece, of course, the text was converted into this bronze sculpture. The castings were done at Walla Walla Foundry in Washington and were quite heavy. Originally the text was going to be filled level, with a color and the black, and then we realized that that kind of took away from the sculptural quality of it; it flattened everything out. Then the color was rubbed out so it would show more of the texture of the metal, which it needed in order to be more sculptural.



Robert Rauschenberg
 Untitled [Tower of Pisa], ca. 1952
 Engraving, printed paper, and glue
 on paper, on paperboard
 9 3/4 x 4 3/4 inches (24.8 x 12.1 cm)
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q2: How did you attach the fabric to the metal?

Elliott: There's a little slit in the base here, so the silk material is pulled through that slit and there's a length of wooden dowel the silk attaches to, to hold it to the back of the sculpture. Of course, this is Galileo [Galilei] and the cannonball and it's all about the gravity doing that. I

believe that Don and Bob were talking about an article in *Time* magazine about a fifth force in nature, something other than what was considered the four forces of nature. This piece was based on this concept of a fifth force, something that's anti-gravity; the idea that you could drop a cannonball and it would fall at different rates than would normally be expected.

Q2: The cannonball that Bob provided, was it cast as well?

Elliott: That wasn't really a cannonball, it was a shot put that was textured with Bondo and painted to give it that effect. These were our transfers. They were photocopy transfers. I don't remember exactly what printer was used, but I know that the emulsion wasn't water solvent. We had to transfer them with xylene, so we were wearing heavy-duty respirators in this room and laying these two images down side-by-side and running it through the press.

Q2: The prints were produced at Graphicstudio?

Elliott: Right.

Q2: I guess I know the answer already, but again [laughs] this edition was initially planned for a total of 25 works and you stopped producing at 12, I can just imagine that—

Elliott: I believe that's the case. It would have been nice to complete them all, but I was moving on with Saff Tech Arts as well.

Q2: To other priorities within the ROCI project?

Elliott: Yes.

Q2: Now we are looking at *Araucan Mastaba* [1986], a work that was created for ROCI Chile in 1986 and again, I am interested in how Rauschenberg found the lapis lazuli that is sitting on the top. My understanding is that you cast the envelope between it. Was he first inspired by only some of the components that we're looking at? Did he add different elements?



Robert Rauschenberg
Araucan Mastaba / ROCI CHILE, 1986
Hand painting and silkscreen ink on mirrored aluminum with cast sterling silver and lapis lazuli
20 5/8 x 22 x 22 inches (52.4 x 55.9 x 55.9 cm)
From an edition of 25, produced by Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa; only 12 realized

Elliott: No, he was inspired, I think, by the lapis. It was mined in Chile, along with the silver. The shape is like the mastaba pyramids that you would find in that area. As for the images, I believe this is the Chilean Madonna and this is, I believe, dried mud from the expansive Chilean landscape. This is the image of revolution in Chile. I'm not sure if I'm stating that correctly. The other image, I've forgotten, but I believe it had to do with the road signs in Chile. The silver

envelope was originally to be cast from a manila paper envelope that wasn't being made anymore. It got lost and Don had to go to Bob and say, "The envelope's lost." Bob said, "No problem," and he sewed up an envelope out of fabric. It actually turned out to be a bit more interesting than had it been cast as a paper envelope because you get all this texture. On this side there is the fold and the little string and button that you would close it with.

I believe he ordered a whole big pile of lapis from this company that furnished it from Chile. I remember seeing a lot of it in this rock garden under the original Beach House [on Rauschenberg's property in Captiva, Florida]. There were just these big pieces of blue lapis stone. I guess he had picked out a number of pieces that we would then make these parts of the sculpture from. We had a little diamond lapidary saw and it was just a matter of cutting a flat on one side and then cutting them in half, running this little diamond saw and keeping it lubricated. I think we pretty well wore that piece of equipment out by the time we were through.

Q2: I believe you.

Elliott: As for the printing, the substrate here is a plywood box, closed on all sides. The original piece had a welded aluminum substrate, but for the editioning process we needed something a little more user-friendly, so the plywood substrate was made. Then these aluminum pieces were attached over the plywood and screenprinted. In order to screenprint them I built the table about so and with a compartment so you could just pick this up, put it in the compartment designed to hold the object with one side up and level with the surface of the table, so that that side could be screenprinted. It had a fold down tabletop so we would just drop the screen over, pull the screen,

flip the tabletop up, take this piece out, put it aside and get the next one, put it in the table and put the tabletop down, then screen again, until you got all of one side done on all of the pieces that were ready to be printed. I'd have to let it dry overnight and then flip it and do another screen, to get the other images on the different sides of the pieces. There are a series of photos showing this printing in process archived at Graphicstudio.

Q2: You used acrylic paints for the screening?

Elliott: These are actually screenprinting inks. The acrylic paint would dry on the screen too fast. If you were doing production runs for Bob's other works, we'd do single screenprintings; those are unique so he can just make one pass, then they can go wash the screen out and go on to the next image. For this, it was a Nazdar 59000 screenprinting enamel transparent screenprinting ink and that way we could continue to print a run without having to wash the screen out each time, until we were through with the day's work.

Q2: Yes. In the documentation material from Graphicstudio, I could see that there was a mighty layout process of producing proofs. I'm wondering if during the production of the first proof, Rauschenberg came in to inspect the work and whether slight adjustments were made?

Elliott: No.

Q2: No?

[Laughter]

Elliott: No. [Laughs] We got it pretty well just the way he wanted it. We took the pieces down and he was happy with them. He likes there to be some variation so the hands-on process, producing some variations in them was a happy accident to him. It gives each one a unique quality; each piece of lapis is a different shape. The ink might go on a little differently from one piece to the next because they're not exactly perfect surfaces to print on.

Q2: I think "happy accident" describes it very, very well. I also didn't realize that. So here's the Graphicstudio stem.

Elliott: There's the Graphicstudio chop, the sign—

Q2: Which is this one?

Elliott: Yes, the little sunburst. The AP [artist proof], the date, R.R. is on there, I believe, and an indication of the silver.

Q2: Yes. Do you remember if you used up all the lapis lazuli for this project? Again, I think it was initially planned to have an edition of 25 and we are only looking at 12, since lapis lazuli is so hard to source and quite expensive as well.

Elliott: I guess some of it must have gone back to Bob or to Graphicstudio. We chose the best pieces we could for the whole edition.

Q2: So now we are looking at *Bamhue*, which was made for ROCI Japan in 1987. This is a fascinating series of artworks. First of all, Bob decided to use a square edge bamboo, which was grown in Kyoto by the only company worldwide that is specializing in that. Can you talk about his fascination about finding the square bamboo and why he turned this series into the neon light base sculptures?

[Laughter]



Robert Rauschenberg
Bamhue / *ROCI JAPAN*, 1987
Bamboo with neon, electrical timer, and metal fixtures
90 x 4 x 10 3/4 inches (228.6 x 10.2 x 27.3 cm)
From an edition of 25 published by Graphicstudio,
University of South Florida, Tampa; only 12 realized

Elliott: I don't know that I can go that deep into his mind. The bamboo part of it is so intriguing, just in itself in being square. I think the Japanese were doing a lot of things like that, growing square watermelons and other produce, probably with the idea of being able to ship it easier

somehow. I'm sure it's just that it's this aesthetically, incredibly beautiful thing; to play on the *Bamhue* and the idea of color, coming up with that pun of a title, *Bamhue* as opposed to bamboo. There are two lines of neon lights in here that are on a random sequence. There are actually six different tubes in there and that makes an awful lot of combinations of light that can happen at any different time. The bronze boxes, all the bronze-coated wire, and the plug: all of that is from naval stores in the Tampa area. The bronze was chosen to complement the bamboo. It's such a quirky thing to have these metallic objects that go so well with the bamboo.

Q2: They're beautiful. I was curious where you found the cord and the plaque and the box. So also on the inside we have the front and the back row of neon tubes that are also slightly different in length and as you already mentioned, the timer is set to not equal intervals. By looking at it we already get a sense that it's switching at times, just to activate one tube at the bottom in either the front or the back and then it can also switch to have two tubes activated at the same time. It also allows for overlap because they are—

Elliott: Right. Some are longer than others.

Q2: Did you experience any cracks in the material when it arrived because the material is known for cracks—

Elliott: It is inherent in this material. As the bamboo dries, it shrinks and it will crack, but not large cracks so it falls apart. It could have some cracks in it, a lot of them do. Sometimes the cracks were incorporated, in terms of being able to split it to make the openings to get inside.

The inside is very intricate actually, the way the substructure works for holding the neon tubes; if it were opened, that would be intriguing in itself. There's this maybe an inch and a half wide slot down the back where the light comes out.

Q2: So you also cut the sides and applied hinges, so you could open it and it was possible to attach the neon tubing during the production process. I assume you worked with a neon company?

Elliott: Yes, there was a very competent neon company in Tampa that we worked with.

Q2: Did Bob determine the light colors and the timing and detail?

Elliott: I believe so. The timing is basically random, the way that the timer works, and which bulbs come on and off. It may have a pattern after a while, but we were given the sequence of colors and so I have to assume that Bob had decided which colors go where.

Q2: There are also two sets of different coatings in there. One is slightly yellow and one is white, creating different colors.

Q: Okay. So you've just spoken really specifically about some of the process involved in creating these pieces and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the daily life. Tell me about the environment that you were working in.

Elliott: Well, Graphicstudio was operating out of some very interesting facilities at that time. I guess there wasn't a lot of space on the USF campus for us, so my partner Nick Conroy and I were working in what was called the ROCI annex. It was a double garage storage space. We had two storage spaces that had no wall between them and so that's where we did most of our work. We would work through a project and then clean all that out and move on to the next project. There was a point where we were trying to do something with the *Tibetan Garden Song* piece, I can't remember exactly what it was, but we had a big sheet spread over a big work table and had gotten as much dust as possible out from under that table, so that was our dust-free workspace, to work on the piece.

We eventually wound up moving to a new facility closer to the university. But it was always an adventure, finding the right places to work and making them work. The day-to-day life was fun. You were trying to solve problems under challenging conditions.

Q: And it was the two of you.

Elliott: The two of us worked on the ROCI sculptures. The rest of the staff worked on other projects.

Q: How were your tasks divided, you and Nick?

Elliott: That's hard to say. We were working on most everything together. One of us would be figuring how to do one thing and we would both be working on the same thing. It was a real

partnership. We shared the tasks and helped each other figure out how to make the work go well and how to do whatever needed to be done. It was pretty much a mutual relationship, just making sure we could work together and get it done. In terms of where we were working, after we were in the ROCI annex, then the printers at Graphicstudio moved out of what was called the observatory. It was an old observatory on the golf course at the University of South Florida. When the printers moved out of there, we got to inherit it, so we got a larger building, more space.

Q: An upgrade.

Elliott: An upgrade, exactly. It was very nice. You'd go outside and there was the golf course surrounding the observatory. It's Florida, so it was very pleasant. You'd take your breaks and go outside or eat lunch outside. It was great.

Q: You said that part of your job was overcoming new challenges and figuring out how to make stuff work. Do you remember any specific breakthroughs that you and Nick were particularly excited about?

Elliott: Let's see. Getting the transfers to work on the silk. We tried several solvents and it was very touchy. It was a matter of finally finding out that this solvent, xylene, was going to take this particular printer copy and dissolve it enough to transfer it onto the silk and then finding the right pressure to make the transfer without squishing it all over the place. It was a challenge doing that. With the *Bamhue*, just figuring out how you're going to fit the—gosh.

[Laughter]

Elliott: How you're going to get the neon in there. You only have so much space. Then we had to figure out how to wire it up, how to cut the bamboo so that it wouldn't shatter, because it did have some cracks in it already. And if we didn't choose wisely, then we could have messed it up.

Q: What would you do with all the stuff that you messed up?

Elliott: We didn't mess up.

[Laughter]

Q: The process of trial and error. All the transfers that didn't work, what happened to that material?

Elliott: It was worthless after that. We went through a few of them, yes. We maybe had to have them re-printed a couple of times.

Q: Did you have Don Saff coming around to check on how things were going?

Elliott: Yes. He came around regularly. He was always interested in how it was going and encouraging or saying, "Don't do it that way." With the *Bamhue*, we had started to fill the cracks

and he told us, “No, don’t fill those cracks. Bob loves those cracks. That’s what he would like in the piece, the happenstance of the nature of the pieces.” We thought about it for half a second and he was right, so we took the filler out and it was good.

Q: What about showing the editions to Bob?

Elliott: That was always fun because we wouldn’t have all of one edition done at one time. We would do several of one piece and then we would pack it into the van and head down to Captiva. We’d have a signing session. Bob might fix dinner if we were staying overnight or we’d spend a little time at a nice restaurant on Captiva. It was a really long drive. Being on Captiva and seeing his studio—I really loved the old studio on the beach side of the island; it was great. We would line up all the work on the worktable and to see a whole line of those *Araucan Mastabas* in a row and hold one up and he’d sign it; we’d hold another one up and he’d sign it; and we’d always have some banter going and he was always very gracious at those times.

Q: Did he ever ask you to revise or change anything?

Elliott: I can’t remember there being a time when we had to revise anything.

Q: So he thought it was a job well done.

Elliott: I assume so.

Q: Who else was around in Captiva at the time when you'd go down?

Elliott: Bradley [J.] Jeffries was there and Lawrence Voytek. Of course, Darryl [R. Pottorf] and there was an all-around handyman, Phillip [Woods], and [Laurence] Lauren Getford, doing a lot of the photography and archiving and digital work. It was always good to hang out with those guys. They were fun.

Q: Okay. So when work on *ROCI USA* began [1990], you told me previously that many staff people were involved in transporting all the materials down to Captiva. Can you tell me about all that preparation?

Elliott: Well, when we knew what the basic premise was, to print on the reflective metal, we had this thing with really thin stainless steel that could be crumpled up. So there were some really crumpled up metal pieces and we had panel after panel of mirrored aluminum, and all the print material, the wax that would be used on some of the prints in conjunction with the acrylic that he used, plus some silkscreen printing ink enamels, some transparent enamels. It was a matter of doing tests and acquiring all the materials. We had different shapes made out of sheet metal. We loaded it all into the van, a big box truck, and carted it all down to Captiva and unloaded into the old Bay House. There was a big storage space there.

That's where work began. We would bring aluminum panels up to the old studio, on the ocean side, which is where the *ROCI USA* project was done. He would say, "Put two panels here or three panels here," and we would start bringing out the screens, put the screen down, he'd say,

“Screen this here, move that here and screen this,” and we’d move from panel to panel and back over the panels. We had special screens made to print the wax on the pieces because the wax couldn’t be screened through the normal silkscreens. Patrick Foy had developed a formula for making this wax soft enough that you could actually print it through a stainless steel screen. The wax could be printed through the screen and released from the screen, and then with a little hand torch we would then burn wax into the surface of the piece. So there were—I can’t imagine the number—enough stainless steel screens, probably to fill half the length of this wall, of several different sizes. All of that was prepared and taken to Captiva for him to work with.



Robert Rauschenberg
In-Dependents / ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works), 1990
 Acrylic, enamel, fire wax, and ladders on mirrored
 aluminum and stainless steel
 113 x 87 x 25 1/2 inches (287 x 221 x 64.8 cm)
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: So did you and Nick have a period of trial and error before you went down to Captiva, playing with all the materials, shopping?

Elliott: Well, the whole staff and all the printers and Nick and I were involved in testing things. Patrick was particularly involved in figuring out how to print on the very thin sheets of stainless

steel, which then needed to be crumpled without popping all the wax off. The wax had to be just right to make sure it adhered.

Q: When you brought the materials down to Captiva, by then you had a sense that these materials should be able to do what it was that Bob was going to be attempting.

Elliott: Yes. The idea was to have a notion of how he was going to want to work, what he was going to want, and our job was to be the tools and the facilitators to figure out how to make it happen.

Q: Were you working with his studio assistants while you were there?

Elliott: Yes.

Q: So how did that work?

Elliott: Great. The crews just melded together. For *ROCI USA*, Darryl and Patrick shared a lot of printing duties. Nick and I were doing a lot of the assembly and preparation, getting the pieces ready to be printed on. George Holzer was doing photography the whole time and assisting in the printing. I think Tom Pruitt was another member of our crew. We were there for probably two weeks; that doesn't even sound long enough. Bob had this great property with all these houses that he could spread us all out in and what was called the old print shop, where a couple of guys would stay. There was the Bay House, which had bedrooms upstairs and a big TV and a kitchen.

The Weeks House was typically where Don would stay. The new studio and new house hadn't been built at that point.

After a day's work, Darryl and Bob would cook or else we'd go to one of a couple of restaurants. There was one right down at the end of Laika Lane, I think it's changed names a few times now, but it was always pretty good. There was a restaurant that had the Bellinis, the standard drink when everyone went there. Dinners with Bob and Darryl cooking were always great.

Q: Would you be working in the same physical space as Lawrence and Lauren and you'd all be in the old studio?

Elliott: Yes. Or Lawrence would be probably, and Nick and I sometimes. We'd be back and forth. Under the old studio was the old metal shop, where all the preparation for framing material was done, cutting aluminum and welding. Some of the *ROCI USA* pieces have applications like ladders or different objects and that was typically laid out in the upstairs studio, but all the assembly would be done basically in the metal shop.

Q: Okay. So you spoke a little bit about the *Wax Fire Works*. David White said to me that the encaustic art was something that Don Saff had suggested that Bob explore, in a similar way to how Lawrence Voytek sometimes came up with other ideas and proposed them, saying, "This might be something fun for you to play with." Did you observe any other instances of that, where people suggested new materials for Bob to work with?

Elliott: Well, as Graphicstudio and Saff Tech Arts, our job was always to try to come up with something new to interest Bob, some kind of new idea or some process that he would then want to do a project with, to stimulate an idea. Like with *Arcadian Retreats* [1996], which was a product of seeing that Bob was doing these transfers onto paper and having a notion that we could do these transfers onto plaster. We thought that would interest him as something additional to the paper medium. So we developed a transfer process, and Patrick Foy and I went down to Captiva and showed Bob the material and said, “Well, you can try this out.” He immediately picked up on it and made some preliminary frescos and liked the process and wanted to do it and that was how that took off.

Q: All right, thank you.

Elliott: You’re welcome.

Q2: So now we are looking at a work that was made for the *Wax Fire Works* series for *ROCI USA*. It’s called *Treadle* and was created in 1990 and the sub-support is made of mirrored aluminum, is this correct?

Elliott: Right.

Q2: Was this produced at Graphicstudio or by Lawrence Voytek?



Robert Rauschenberg
Treadle / ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works), 1990
Acrylic and fire wax on mirrored aluminum
96 3/4 x 49 5/16 inches (245.7 x 125.3 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Elliott: Saff Tech Arts. The very first project Saff Tech Arts had was *ROCI USA* and so these were all produced at Captiva, at Bob's studio. We took the materials, the anodized aluminum and, as you can see, this deep purple-blue wax. There was a whole palette of waxes that were made and carried down to the studio. We made a wax to complement every color that he had in his Golden palette, so that he would have the whole range of his usual palette of colors to use. Then we had some transparent screenprinting inks, like we used on the *Mastaba*, and he incorporated them all together to make some pretty nice pieces.

Q2: For the wax, did you use beeswax and add it to raw pigments?

Elliott: It's raw pigments and bleached beeswax, with the right proportions of the solvents to make it work through the screen.

Q2: Did you add mineral spirits to the beeswax?

Elliott: No. Mineral spirits were used to release it from the screens.

Q2: You already mentioned the process, that you had to use a stainless steel screen because—

Elliott: Stainless steel.

Q2: —the wax is much more viscous and so the screen size had to be adjusted accordingly?

Elliott: Right.

Q2: So you could basically transfer the wax on the surface.

Elliott: Yeah, move the wax through the screen. If you were to look really close there, you could see the screen pattern on the surface of the wax.

Q2: Yes, I can certainly see it here. Did you slightly heat the surface again once you—

Elliott: Oh, once the wax—? Well, sometimes, it all depended on what effect Bob wanted. If Bob wanted it to be more of a matte finish, we would leave it alone. If he wanted more of a satin finish, then a small hand torch would be used to melt the surface of the wax and flow it out.

Q2: Is this what you did up here?

Elliott: That would be hot wax that was just brushed onto the surface and then it was dusted with an aluminum powder, to make it have that silvery look. Then the aluminum powder was burned into the surface of the brushed-on wax.

Q2: The black that we are looking at, I can see differences in sheen, if you look at it from raking light.

Elliott: The black is the Golden acrylic.

Q2: Okay, so you have silkscreen inks, Golden acrylic, and wax.

Elliott: This piece, I believe, this is acrylic and wax. You see this little haze of orange in there?

Q2: Yes.

Elliott: That would be the silkscreen ink and then there's some acrylic printed over that. This is orange wax.

Q2: It looks like it was painted with some spaces in between. Is this correct?

Elliott: Bob had it taped off. Tape this way and tape this way, then the wax was brushed across it, burned, and the tape was removed, and then it was burned with a torch to even it out.

Q2: Was the surface prepared in any way? Is there a final coating?

Elliott: It was just cleaned to make sure there was no oil on the surface, nothing that would resist the materials adhering to the surface of the pieces.

Q2: You already touched on this subject a little bit because in some cases you applied the encaustic paint on a plain sheet of metal, but then it got crumpled and distorted and you already mentioned the importance of the right ratio in order to produce something like this. So am I correct that the distortion must have been applied after you—

Elliott: The metal was crumpled after the printing was done.

Q2: How did you do this without the paint flaking off?

Elliott: The wax was supple enough, it was probably heated at just the point that you crumpled up the metal and—

Q2: From behind?

Elliott: So it still has the viscosity to withstand being pulled on by the metal being crumpled.

Q2: But you did it at Graphicstudio?

Elliott: No. That was done at Captiva. I think there's a photograph of Bob doing a test piece, wearing gloves, and actually crumpling the metal and wax.



Rauschenberg working on his *Wax Fire Works* series (1990–91) in his Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1990. Work in background: *Washington's Golden Egg / ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)* (1990). Collection on Robert Rauschenberg Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q2: This is very impressive to me because the properties of the two materials that you used are so different and you really pushed both materials—

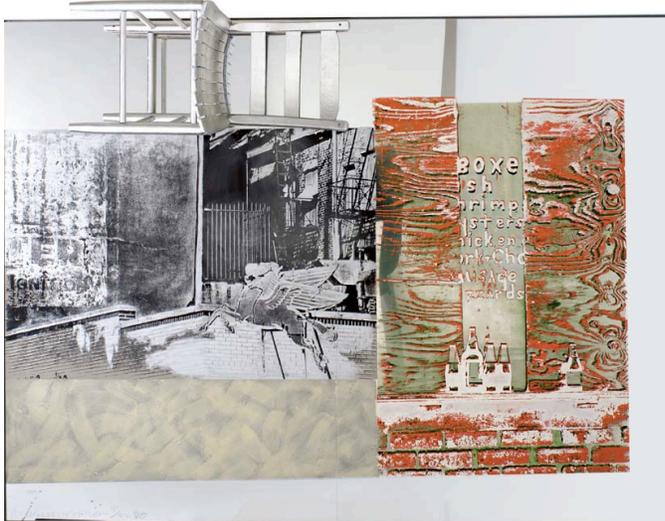
[Laughter]

Q2: —to the limit in a very impressive way.

Elliott: Kind of scary.

[Laughter]

Elliott: But some of the *Wax Fire Works*, the USA pieces, weren't just plain like this. They had attachments to them. I know there was one that had pieces of ladder affixed to it [*In-Dependents / ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)*, 1990] and then there was *Pegasits* [1990] which had an actual restaurant chair attached to the surface of the piece. The chairs are actually from a restaurant right down the road from Laika Lane, Timmy's Nook, I think it was called. In exchange we bought them new chairs and had the old ones silver-leafed—to go on the surface of the *Pegasits* piece.



Robert Rauschenberg
Pegasits / ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works), 1990
 Acrylic, fire wax, hand-painting and gilt
 silver leaf chair on stainless steel
 72 3/4 x 96 3/4 x 17 1/2 inches (184.8 x 245.7
 x 44.5 cm)
 From an edition of 22 produced by Saff Tech
 Arts, Oxford, Maryland

Q2: Wonderful, very, very impressive technology. Thank you.

Elliott: Thank you.

Q: You just spoke about some of the work that you were involved in creating over a five-year period and then ROCI comes to a close. Can you talk about ROCI winding down and how that was felt in the studio or the print shop?

Elliott: It was great because then we all got to go to the opening of the ROCI USA in the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, D.C., *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange*, 1991]. That was a really spectacular event. We got to help install some of the work there. We knew there would be another project coming from Bob eventually. But there was a rotation in the art world. You'd work with someone else for a while and then come back to us again.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about the installation at the National Gallery.

Elliott: Basically, the works were shipped there and then they'd have to come out of their crates. A lot are multiple panel pieces so they had to be bolted together and it took a crew of people to get them on the wall. Since we were familiar with how the pieces were assembled, the National Gallery staff used us as assistants so that they could have hands-on assistance on how they went together and how they could be handled.

Q: Did you attend the opening?

Elliott: Oh yes. It was great.

Q: You must have felt a sense of pride as well, walking around and seeing—

Elliott: Oh yes. To see that whole show, see the range of works from all the different countries, it was overwhelming actually, because you just get a sense of what an endeavor that was for Bob to undertake and he financed it with his own money. It's really impressive to have that kind of a commitment to an idea and to have it come to such a payoff. It was great.

Q: Around that time Don Saff moved from Florida up to Maryland.

Elliott: Right.

Q: Was that an easy decision for you to make that move as well?

Elliott: Yes. That was very easy. He had already hired several of us away from Graphicstudio when he decided to do Saff Tech Arts, so we operated in Florida as Saff Tech Arts for a year before we moved to Maryland. That was during the time in which we were preparing *ROCI* and once the project was completed in Captiva and everything was packed up to go to the National, except the editioning process for *Pegasits, Narcissus* [/ *ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)*, 1990], *Seminole Host* [/ *ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)*, 1990], and *Swim* [/ *ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)*, 1990]. Editioning for those took place at the new workshop in Oxford, Maryland. Bob came there and signed when those editions were completed.

Q: Did the move have an impact on the way that you worked at all?

Elliott: Not really. It was the same crew. We were all used to working together. It was nice to have the facility that Saff Tech Arts had in Oxford. We had two buildings; one was the sculpture and workshop area, a building in Oxford proper, and then just outside of Oxford there was a Saff Tech Arts building where all the printing and photography was done, and where the offices were.

Q: How many people were working there?

Elliott: When we first moved to Maryland, fourteen. Fourteen people moved up from Tampa, Florida to the Oxford, Maryland area, different little towns around there.

Q: And was Nick still your partner in—

Elliott: Yes. Yes, he was still there at that point. Some of us acclimated to the climate better than others. [Laughs] He was born and raised in Florida and decided he was eventually going back, so after a couple of years, he went back to Florida. He's now at the Atlantic Center for the Arts [New Smyrna Beach].

Q: Was it an adjustment to be working with a larger team?

Elliott: No, it was pretty much the same team that was working together in Florida. It was a substantial crew with curators as well as production staff and office staff.

Q: But you were in the same physical space as many more after the move, no longer in your garage or in your observatory.

Elliott: Well, actually, Nick and I had the sculpture facility pretty much to ourselves.

[Laughter]

Elliott: So we were still not so troubled by [laughs] all the rest of them.

Q: Okay. And were you traveling back to Captiva during that time?

Elliott: Did we still go back to Captiva for projects?

Q: Yes.

Elliott: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay. And what were the projects during that period?

Elliott: I think the first one after *ROCI USA* was *Eco-Echo* [1992–93] and that involved a sculpture. It's composed of a windmill fan in which the blades had been readapted to imagery and on the machine, the aluminum base had some automatic door sensors that would actually activate the fan blade so that when you approached it, it would turn on and operate for you and if

you walked away from it, it would stop. I forget exactly the quote that Bob had about it. It would play only if you were giving it attention, to paraphrase, but you had to engage it to have it work.



Robert Rauschenberg
Eco-Echo IV, 1992–93
Acrylic and silkscreen ink on aluminum and
Lexan with sonar-activated motor
88 x 73 x 26 inches (223.5 x 185.4 x 66 cm)
Made in collaboration with Saff Tech Arts,
Oxford, Maryland

Q: That piece, I believe, was part of a response to Bob's attendance at the Earth Summit Committee [note: Earth Summit, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 1992]. Is that something that he would speak to you about or that you heard about indirectly from Don Saff?

Elliott: More indirectly. We knew what his ecological interests were and that this would have some reference to that.

Q: Okay. Great. So we're going to have you talk about the piece. Thank you.

Elliott: All right, be happy to.

Q2: So this is *Eco-Echo IV*, one of the windmills from the series *Eco-Echo*, which was created between 1992 and 1993. This is a fascinating, interactive piece that works with sonar technology, so maybe you can tell us about the production of the piece, the process of the windmill, which has this bicycle wheel in the back and this metal construction, and how it came to life.

Elliott: Okay. Well, we were looking for a project that interested Bob and the windmill was an iconic image for him—a windmill, the bicycle wheel; it would recur in his work. Patrick Foy was watching probably a Charles Kuralt *Sunday Morning* thing, “On the Road” or something, but it mentioned the last windmill manufacturer in America and it was this company. So we contacted them and had them ship us a windmill fan and showed it to Bob. I’m probably out of sequence here in how things happened, but the acquisition of the fan was from this company that had been making windmills since forever and it was the last one in business in the United States.

When the piece is cutting on and off, it’s driven by a little worm gear motor on the left side, which runs a belt that drives the bicycle wheel that’s on the back, and so the chain from the bicycle chain turns the sprocket that turns the fan. It’s activated by these sonar automatic door openers. Whenever you’re walking towards a big supermarket and the door opens, these are the things that do it. Typically, when you’re in that situation you don’t hear that little tick-tick-tick-tick-tick, but it’s there. You hear it more obviously on this piece because there’s not all the ambient sound around it. Bob made this to be interactive and it says if you don’t play, it doesn’t play. So you have to be in range to make it go. You have to give it attention before it will perform for you.

Q2: Bob was particular about the use of the sonar technology, right? Or was it introduced to him by Don Saff?

Elliott: He knew of the technology. I don't think he much cared how it operated, as long as it operated the way he wanted, which was that you had to give it attention for it to perform for you. The first part of the process was having him approve a base. So a mock-up was made in heavy plywood of this shape and then we were able to take that to a local machine shop with our drawings and tell them exactly what we wanted. I was the liaison between machine shop and the Saff Tech Art shop, and so it was trial and error to get the right feel and the right angles to carry the thing out.

Q2: Who developed the electrics and electronics?

Elliott: Don. He's always been fascinated with electronics and radio engineering. I know he was supposed to do a whole electronic radio broadcast from Cuba during *ROCI CUBA* [1988] that never materialized because Cuba decided they didn't want to have someone with a lot of sophisticated radio equipment coming in there and making a broadcast at that point.

Q2: So there's a schematic on the back of the piece.

Elliott: There's a schematic on the back of the piece.

Q2: It's placed on a piece of Plexiglas. It's quite beautifully made. Don did this as well?

Elliott: Well—how exactly does the schematic work? I guess Don did work up the schematic, but it combines the schematic for the box that controls the electronics over here and the little box over here that has the electronics that controls this range of the sensors. Yes. Yes, Don drew up the schematic.

Q2: Was he also in charge of the wiring? Or had you engineers?

Elliott: We did all the wiring.

Q2: You did all the wiring. Very impressive. When the windmill first arrived, what did it look like?

Elliott: It had galvanized blades. It came in parts. You had all these clips that hold the blades, but we just abandoned the original blades. Those were used to make a template. The process was, we laid out the sheets of aluminum or Plexiglas on the table and then Bob picked screens and had them screened onto these sheets of Plexiglas or sheets of aluminum. Then using a template, he came back and would put the template down and scribed, drew around the template, to indicate what the image for that blade would be. So then we would cut that blade out of the metal and that's what became the blade that was inserted into the fan.

Q2: He would determine the sequence?

Elliott: Yes, he laid out all the fans. There could be six, could be nine, I'm not sure about the number, but it was laid out on the floor [note: there are nine *Eco-Echo* works]. Right after the ROCI project, he moved into his new house and studio. The ROCI pieces were initially hung to be photographed in the new house on the beach. It's a huge gallery and entertaining room, and for this project he laid out all the fans on the floor of the room.



Rauschenberg working on his *Eco-Echo* series (1992–93) in his home, Captiva, Florida, 1993. Collection on Robert Rauschenberg Research. Robert Rauschenberg Archives, New York. Photo: Donald Saff

Q2: They're all different for all the—

Elliott: All different, every one of them is different. Some would have more of this kind of fan or there were clear ones. They were all different. He laid them out individually. And—

Q2: And how about the center disc—

Elliott: I was just going to say, the centers are all different too. He screened different images for the different centers.

Q2: I can see that, other than silkscreens, there are also two brushstrokes?

Elliott: Yes, he did some handwork on some of them as well.

Q2: And two lead pieces attached to the centerpiece, I guess this is to balance the—

Elliott: That's to keep it somewhat balanced, to keep the bottom down. To allow it to move, but to not have it just continue to spin with the fan.

Q2: So the original technology, and please correct me if I'm wrong, was set up in a way that you had to have these two components of the sonar, because one was transmitting and the other was receiving. And meanwhile they changed the technology and so we were sourcing spare parts and now they have both built in one unit.

Elliott: Right, in both.

Q2: The transmitting and the receiving.

Elliott: Yes, it all happens in one—

Q2: Which also had affected the control unit; they basically changed the circuit board in the meantime, but this is all to say that even with the new technology, it was important to use the reference that was set when you created the piece, so the response of the artwork can be adjusted to the room size of the exhibition.

Elliott: Right. There is a little adjustment screw in this box that has to be done with a plastic blade screwdriver. [Laughs] You can fry the insides. But the sonar has a substantial range. This could be operated in a large room and you could be 15 feet away and have it activated if you wanted to.

Q2: The yellow cord is quite prominent as well. Do you remember Bob having thought about that?

Elliott: I don't. It's probably just the cord that we found from the electrical supply house that was the right gauge and it just happened to be a nice color.

Q2: Do you remember them ever getting damaged during exhibition? Has it ever been sent back to you to?

Elliott: It's never been sent back to us. We've been sent to them.

[Laughter]

Elliott: Yes. Because there have been occasions where the circuit board has been damaged or there's been an electrical malfunction, but nothing particularly serious. Obviously there are situations where it could be damaged. But I think they've been pretty durable.

Q2: It's responding to it. Did you hear that?

Elliott: Yes.

[Laughter]

Q2: From the technology-based work, we are now looking at an artwork that is referring to more traditional techniques. It's a fresco series, *Arcadian Retreat*, which was created in 1996. To my knowledge, this fresco to the right was given to Rauschenberg by Don and served as an inspiration for the creation of the series.



Imperial Roman fresco fragment, ca. 1 CE. Gift from Donald Saff to Robert Rauschenberg

Elliott: Right. Now this is a fragment of an antique fresco and I'm sure that Don presented it to Bob with the notion of getting him interested in frescos and then being able to suggest a modern fresco made with Hydrocal gypsum plaster, as opposed to the old lime plaster that the antique frescos were made with. This is at least a 1/2-inch of plaster surfaced onto a Hexcel panel, a honeycomb aluminum panel. Some of these *Arcadian Retreats* are up to three panels construction. I think it might be one panel to make this one piece. Another piece in the series might be three panels long or two panels wide and a panel at the bottom. But this is the modular unit that was used for the project. The Hexcel was cut to size. A form was put around the edge. A galvanized hardware cloth was used as a lathe for the plaster to adhere to. That hardware cloth was attached to the Hexcel panel, with a spacer to raise the lathe off the surface of the panel a bit. Then it was formed, meaning that there was an edge put all the way around the piece, so that it would contain the plaster when the plaster was poured over the surface. So once it was formed, then the Hydrocal was mixed and poured onto the surface of this. It had to be pretty level to contain it without slopping one way or another. Then the surface was troweled a bit to even it out, and that's where you see these little trowel-like surfaces in there, which really appealed to Bob, having that texture.

Q2: So this is where the plaster just slopped over the form a little bit?

Elliott: Right. Right. Yes, that would be where the form is just up to the edge. Then the plaster would seep down into the surface of the Hexcel on the edges.

Q2: But given the entire technique, your working time is limited because you have to—



Robert Rauschenberg
Contest (Arcadian Retreat), 1996
Fresco in artist's frame
74 1/2 x 38 1/2 inches (189.2 x 97.8 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Elliott: The plaster sets fast. You mix it and once it starts to go, you have to get it in a form and trowel it out in a hurry. It's not slow like the old lime plaster, where you had a day to work. This, well, the whole process was different. That's why I'm calling it a contemporary fresco because to apply the color, to apply the images, the plaster is cured; it's been completely dried before the images are ever put on it. But then there's a transfer solution that is brushed onto the surface and Bob would take these Iris prints, made on an Iris printer, and place them on there and then use a squeegee to allow the color copier material to transfer into the plaster. It actually goes into the surface of the plaster; it's not just *on* the surface of the plaster.

Q2: It is referenced in the literature that Don developed a new solvent or a new solvent combination that helped the dye transferring into the plaster surface.

Elliott: There is a solution that he used, that we used to do that with. [Laughs]

Q2: Were there any challenges within the process, any drawbacks that needed to be corrected while developing this technique?

Elliott: Well, it took a while to become comfortable with it, but once we were comfortable with it, it was easy to make Bob comfortable with it. Patrick Foy and I took some little panels, I think there were three of them, and Bob was immediately into it, transferring those images into the plaster. Obviously it makes a beautiful, beautiful work.

Q2: I like the fact that you are calling it new fresco because it's really introducing contemporary imagery into a very old technique.

Elliott: Right. And the *Arcadian Retreats* are images from his travels in Turkey. In old Arcadia, so to speak, and where there were original frescos.

Q2: Did you wash out some of the edges here on the top? How did you make it appear like that?

Elliott: That's part of the transfer process, which was what Bob really loved. Depending on the viscosity of the solution and the way it was brushed on, you could get a really clear transfer, say like these blocks here, which transferred without much distortion. But up here, when the solution was thinner, you would get this more transparent look through this part of the surface. Or it wasn't even brushed out to the edge, so it wouldn't transfer there. This was another situation where we did all of the preliminary work; all the fresco panels were made beforehand at Saff

Tech Arts in Maryland. All the printing was done beforehand. George Holzer managed all the images that Bob gave us to be turned into the Iris prints. George oversaw the printing of these pieces. We had our own Iris machine, but we only had one machine at Saff Tech Arts and David Adamson of David Adamson Gallery [Washington, D.C.] had several, so he could print on more of a production basis. So George would develop a print on our machine and then take it to Adamson for multiple production.

Q2: At Graphicstudio had you worked on fresco before? Or was this technique specifically developed for Rauschenberg?

Elliott: It was specifically developed for Bob.

Q2: Thank you.

Elliott: Well, there's one thing. Once the image was in the surface, then they were waxed. Beeswax was put on the surface of the plaster to really fix it and make it waterproof and make the color pop.

Q2: Yes, I can see that it has positive effects on the color separation, but I can also see that while some dust can build up on the surface, on the very porous surface over time, this definitely has a good effect on its overall appearance and also preventive conservation.

Elliott: That was very, very protective and it brought the colors up really nice and fresh and they'll stay nice and fresh. It protects the surface of the plaster. Beeswax, just melt it in.

Q2: Thank you.

Elliott: You're welcome.

Q: Great. So by the time you were working on this series, Bob had moved into the new studio.

Elliott: Right.

Q: Did that have a different feeling?

Elliott: Oh yes, it had a very different feeling. The new studio was much larger; it had a huge working space. The old studio was more cramped. I could not tell you that I had a favorite, working in one place or the other. The old studio had great character, being part of an old Florida residence and on the beach side of the island. The new studio was just such a great workspace, so accessible, so encouraging to work in. Yes, it was different, but it wasn't better or worse.

[Laughter]

Elliott: It was good.

Q: Did you enjoy the swimming pool outside the new studio?

Elliott: The swimming pool was great. All the residences were great; the swimming pool was great. Being on Captiva was great. We didn't have a lot of down time, but when we did have a day off, we would go fishing. There was the Fish House, which was [Jay Norwood] "Ding" Darling's fish camp, which is part of Bob's property. Fishing was oftentimes very good off of there. Patrick Foy and I took our kayaks down and on the day that we had off we circumnavigated Captiva in our kayaks, which was about twelve miles. We were worn out when we got back. I don't know that we were that great the next day [laughs] of work. But it was a great place to work. We couldn't have worked in a better situation.

Q: How long were you down there, working on this particular series?

Elliott: Probably at least a week, maybe a little longer. ROCI was the longest. We were down there for quite a while for that—yes, it was probably a week. Maybe two weeks, by the time you set all the materials out, start making the transfers, and once the plaster has been rewetted and the images are down, it has to dry before you can put the wax surface on it. Once Bob completed the frescos, all the panels were taken back to Saff Tech Arts in Oxford, Maryland. There, Eric Holt did all the fabrication of the substructures and framing, and I assisted him.

Q: Was this the final series that you worked on?

Elliott: This was the last series that we worked on with Bob. We had some other ideas in the works, but they just never materialized. We had some things that probably would have appealed to him and—

Q: Do you remember the specifics of any of those other ideas?

Elliott: Well, some of them involved printing on stretchable fabric, stretched over shapes, involving more transfer into fabric and some actual color copier transfers onto metal. I know we have one test piece that's this red shop rag printed on a piece of brass and it looks like there's a shop rag [laughs] right on that piece of brass, but it's a beautiful transfer. It would have appealed to him. But time gets by.

Q: So okay, is there any reason that none of those projects came to fruition?

Elliott: I think because Bob was basically able to just focus on his own work at that point, that his energy level was beginning to taper off a bit.

Q: Was that something that you were already observing when you were working on this series?

Elliott: Not so much on this series.

Q: Okay. Well, you've come into this room today and you're looking at all of this work. Do you associate your time working on Bob's work with any particular professional learning? What was the great takeaway for you?

Elliott: I was always surprised at what he would do. I never found Bob to be an easy person to read. His personality was mercurial and he could be really funny one minute and very serious the next and the banter was always interesting, but you never knew just where he was going next. It was the same way with the artwork. He'd have a panel laid out and we would be wondering well, what image is he going to choose next? Or what color? Why is he doing that? And then he would do it or tell you to screen this color, use this particular color, arrange this thing in this certain way and then you would go, "Wow." It was becoming aware of what an incredible artist he was and then that enlightening me; my coworkers and I were able to see things differently than we would have otherwise. I'm sure it affected everybody's own work. Not that we were able to make a lot of it because we were [laughs] spending all our time working for other artists. But it certainly enhanced my view of the world.

Q: That's great, thank you.

Elliott: You're welcome.

Q: Is there anything that we haven't asked you about today that you want to include?

Elliott: There's one project we didn't talk about, which was the *Shales* [1994–95].

Q: Right.

Elliott: That was color copier transfers into wax. Those are really beautiful pieces on their own. Here you have this plaster surface and the transfer is really into the surface. On the *Shales*, the wax layers were built up and the color copier transfers were transferred right into the wax. So they're really vibrant. They're just so clear and the surface of the wax, because it's been brushed on and then flamed and burned in; so texturally they're very elegant. Very elegant pieces. The way he composed the images on the stark white wax backgrounds—it was just some of the most beautiful work I've ever seen.



Robert Rauschenberg
Occur (Shales), 1994
Fire wax and transfer on canvas
60 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches (152.4 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
Made in collaboration with Saff Tech Arts,
Oxford, Maryland
Collection, Ruth and Don Saff

Q: All right. Thank you so much.

Elliott: You're welcome.

Q2: Thank you. I learned a lot from you today.

[END OF INTERVIEW]