RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Donald Saff

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2013

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Donald Saff conducted by James McElhinney on August 15, 2013 and August 16, 2013. This interview is part of the 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

Transcriber: 3PM | Session #1

Interviewee: Donald Saff | Location: Oxford, MD

Interviewer: James L. McElhinney | Date: August 15, 2013

Q: This is James McElhinney speaking with Donald Saff at his studio and workshop in Oxford, Maryland, on Thursday the fifteenth day of August 2013. Interview conducted by the Columbia Oral History Center on behalf of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Good afternoon.

Saff: Good afternoon.

Q: Just for the record, too, it's 1:15 in the afternoon.

So as you know, the Rauschenberg Foundation is launching an oral history project, which is why we're here to speak to you because of all the work that you did with Bob Rauschenberg. But before we explore all of that, why don't we talk a little about you, establish a little context.

Saff: Well, James, just tell me what the ground rules are here. What's the range of information you want on Rauschenberg?

Q: Entirely up to you. Whatever you can share we'll be glad to collect.

Saff: I recall Avis Berman, do you know her?

Q: Oh, yes.

Saff: So Avis came here and she did a couple of days on Roy [Lichtenstein], and she started off by saying, "You can tell me anything—bad, good, whatever. We want the full picture. We don't want anything edited." I mean, she made it clear that they weren't looking for a puff piece. They wanted—

Q: No, I think this is where we are. We're looking for authentic stories about Bob Rauschenberg. And they can be flattering or unflattering. They don't need to be verifiable. It's your version.

Saff: Right.

Q: I like to often quote the movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [1962], "Print the legend." This is your story and stories about Bob that are your stories or stories about him that you've heard from others, or stories that he told you. We're here to collect stories.

Saff: Right. Of course, I spent a lot of time with him, a lot of time—traveling with him and working with him since around '72, I guess. I was a fan well before that. But what we're dealing with here is Charles Foster Kane.

Q: Exactly. And where's the sled?

Saff: Right. Where's the sled? And in fact, that's all there. This is a man of varied abilities, interest, focus, emotional strengths and weaknesses, frailties, strengths. Just a remarkable guy and a very difficult and forceful person at the same time.

So your initial question is?

Q: Well, let's find out a little about you. I know that there is a lot of information out there about you. But just to sort of establish a context or a launching point for this narrative, let's introduce the reader of the transcript of this audio interview to you. You grew up in New York City, right? Brooklyn?

Saff: Yes, I grew up in New York City, Brooklyn and Queens. I went to Queens College starting off as an engineering major. Got through about a year and came across someone in the cafeteria who invited me over to the painting studio, John Ferren's painting studio. And it was, as they say, a life-changing experience. That day, I went home and told my parents that I was switching to art. I could have told them just about anything but that. That was the beginning of my activities in the arts. I had always been drawing as a child but never thought of devoting full time to it. So that's where it basically started.

I went through Queens College and was offered a fellowship to stay on there to be both a slide librarian—4-by-4 lantern slides that is—and to begin to teach some art history courses. But I decided I was going to go to law school. So I left, went to Florida, enrolled in the University of Miami Law School [Coral Gables]. Stayed there for about eight months, at which time—was it

Lowe [Art] Museum [University of Miami]?—acquired a [Thomas] Gainsborough [painting]. I went there with some fellow students to look at the Gainsborough. I could not deal with their reaction to it. And the next day, left, returned to New York, and applied to Columbia [University] and Pratt [Institute] simultaneously.

Q: What was the reaction that you objected to?

Saff: It was such a lyrical painting. It's so beautiful. And their reaction was just simply cavalier. In observing them looking, you realized that they weren't looking. They weren't looking and they certainly weren't seeing, and if these were going to be my colleagues for the remainder of my life, I thought it would be best to review what my goals were. So I went back up to New York. Of course at that time, the idea of getting a position in a college was just impossible. We're talking about '59. Having gone through Queens College, the politics were incredible there—John Ferren fighting with Carl Stover. I mean, it was just impossible.

What had happened was that I started school and was really basically destitute. The person who did take on the position of the fellowship that was offered to me became a good friend, and subsequently, committed suicide in the middle of his tenure there.

Q: Who was that?

Saff: His name was Frank Jesperson—a superb painter out of the University of Illinois. Superb painter. And as a matter of fact, Dorothy [C.] Miller was about to give him a show at the

[Museum of] Modern [Art, New York] in the Members' Gallery, which was phenomenal. I mean, he was a young kid. He was fairly troubled and very bright and he just killed himself and sent me a letter, which I received two days later, which was a very curious thing and asked that he be buried next to his father. And as I owed him money, which was a couple of hundred dollars because I was destitute and he had the job and we were working together, he said, "Everything is forgiven. All debts are forgiven. Please be sure that I'm buried beside my father."

And with that, I was also called in to ask whether I would take over the position again. I then took the position, which gave me a teaching schedule of, I think, four art history classes during the day and three at night for the School of General Studies, for which I was paid something like $4,500 for the seven classes and delighted to get it. And so there I stayed until I became the focus of a lot of political heat. You know Diane Kelder?

Q: Oh, sure.

Saff: So Diane and I were the focus of John Ferren taking over and we both got pushed out basically simultaneously. She was a good friend. I went to the State University of New York in New Paltz and received the Fulbright at that point—I forget the name of the chairman. He said he had Fulbrights who wanted my job—and why would I leave? I left. And it was just wonderful.

I got to Italy in '64, after the [Venice] Biennale. But I had followed Rauschenberg for a long time because I would frequent the Cedar bar [Cedar Tavern, New York] and I would listen in to

Harold Rosenberg and Franz Kline and others who were there. And there was Rauschenberg who was sort of shy in the background. It's like various tiers of how shy you were. I mean, I was in the background watching Rauschenberg watching the Abstract Expressionists. But I followed them and I was a fan of Rauschenberg. I watched them closely, along with the others.

Then, came back, got a job teaching art history at the University of South Florida [Tampa] and resolved to do a couple of things. One, I wanted to make sure that I had more degrees than anybody so I'd never be subject to the kind of politics at Queens College. So I very quickly became chair of the art department there. I didn't want an administrative position but I thought in order to accommodate some of the things I wanted to do, it was necessary. I only went there for a one-year job. Actually, I was waiting for an offer from Pratt and from Columbia. Columbia never made an offer. Pratt made an offer but I had already signed the contract in August with South Florida.

So there I was for a year and it was horrible being out of New York for the first time ever. I thought, well, what I'll do is begin to bring New York to me if I'm going to be here, if I don't get out of here. I started a studio while I was teaching art history, which was called Graphicstudio University of South Florida, Institute for Research in Art], which subsequently was archived at the National Gallery [of Art (NGA), Washington, D.C.]. And it was just sort of dumb luck of being able to work with various artists of increasing importance as one began to speak to another and the word got out that here is a place you could go to that was noncommercial that had the resources of chemists, of engineers, of whatever, and that where, ultimately—though it didn't start off that way—you could basically do whatever you want and it would be supported. It

started out more like a Tamarind [Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque] operation where I invited people in to do some lithographs. But when [James "Jim"] Rosenquist was in an automobile accident and was severely hurt, I just turned the studio over to him and realized that maybe abundance was the mother of invention as well as necessity. We provided him with all kinds of opportunities, and with that came all kinds of art that he would not normally have produced under any other circumstances.

Q: Had he established his home in Aripeka [Florida] yet?

Saff: No. That was all a product of me bringing him down to Florida. It's interesting because [James] Turrell came here to Oxford because of him working with me. Jim came down to Florida, was so in love with it, went to the Columbia Restaurant in Tampa, and then had an automobile accident. But that was his first time there and he eventually was there for a very long period of time and established himself in Florida over the following years, and brought down John Chamberlain who worked near me in Tampa as well. So with this accident, Bob Rauschenberg arrived to see Jim and the family in their hospital room. And I was there when Bob Rauschenberg walked in. Of course, Leo [Castelli] had come down and the Brundage girls [Susan L. and Patricia L. Brundage] were there, and various people. But Bob Rauschenberg walked in with [Robert "Bob"] Petersen. Just having watched him over the years, I just knew the genius he was.

Q: Robert Petersen?

Saff: No, Rauschenberg. Petersen was his assistant.

Q: Right.

Saff: And one of the few assistants who wasn't in it for ulterior motives or other agendas, that really cared deeply for Bob and was very supportive of Rauschenberg. And I couldn't believe he was there.

I spoke with him and gathered up the nerve to ask him to come out to the studio. I guess I've told this story, but he came out to the studio and looked around. I had purchased rolls of paper from Surplus Property that was a kind of wrapping paper that had bitumen in between the sheets. It was impervious—but it was there for wrapping. And there was a closet that the custodians used and they had tall garbage bags that were about this high, and had words across the top, "Fill to this level." But they were just giant paper bags. He looked around. He said nothing. I think at the time maybe we were working with Adja Yunkers. No, we were about to start with Jim, but we were working with Adja Yunkers. And I finally got up enough nerves and I said, "Would you consider working here?" And he said, "I never thought you'd ask." Then he started out immediately saying, "I want to work with that paper," which was the throwaway paper, and the bags that were in the custodian's closet. I'm putting out lush, beautiful paper and all of that.

The education actually didn't start there. It started two hours earlier, because I was so excited picking him up and his agreement to go out there. And we got lost. And I said, "Mr. Rauschenberg, I apologize. Actually, I'm lost. I'll find my way back." And he said, "Being lost

is fantastic because you're just in places that you never anticipated being in." He said, "If you're lost, then you're in the right place." [Laughs]

Q: That's a fortune cookie, right?

Saff: Yes. I mean, it just started there, and he was so disarming in his openness and flexibility of focus and interest that within hours, it was already a new experience. I knew that I was in new territory. I guess that's the introduction I had to Rauschenberg.

In terms of studios, I had worked at Graphicstudio for a long while and got very close with Bob. He would fly up regularly and I would go down there, which was oftentimes pretty painful because—

Q: At Captiva [Florida], you mean?

Saff: Captiva. I'd go down to Captiva. And you never knew how to bring up a project with him. You always had an idea for a new project but he had this way of putting you off. You didn't sit down and have a conversation so you didn't know how to bring up, "Would you like to do a new project? I have this idea." Somehow, he deflected frontal approaches. And so we would sit 'til about, at that time, maybe 2:00 in the morning, and he'd then say, "Let's go over to the studio," at 2:00 in the morning to start work and work for a few hours. You'd keep him company. Then he'd come back and he'd sleep, and he'd sleep 'til midday. Of course, I'm up at 6:00 in the morning, no matter what time I went to bed. And you're waiting for him to wake up. Finally, you

ask him whether he would like to do a project and you wouldn't always get a direct response. Everything was sort of choreographed by him. It's like from the days of Merce [Cunningham] and traveling around Europe. Everything was choreography. He danced around everything. Even the way he responded, it was like a word game. How he took your words and changed them around or threw them back at you or played with them, or whatever. You were always on guard. There was nothing straightforward. There was just no straightforward approach with him. There's no straightforward feedback. Not, "I love this. I want to do this. That's a great idea." Nothing. There didn't seem to be a value judgment on anything.

As I thought back over the years, that was really consistent with the way in which he approached his art. You couldn't get him to say that he favored one painting or another or that that was a tour de force as opposed to a lesser work. There was no hierarchy of material. Dirt was as important as gold and so it was hard to get responses from him. Anyhow, that was the beginning of working with him.

I don't know how much you want in terms of—you asked me about my activities or my career. All the while, I was teaching art history and working with developing an opera program and theater, and bringing in the Guarneri Quartet on a regular basis for master classes. So, I was juggling a lot of things at the same time. And trying to find printers and artisans who didn't know how things should look, didn't have the Tamarind methodology—maybe had the Tamarind skills—but not the Tamarind methodology. That didn't know what an original print should be by definition of the Print Council of America—were completely open to ways in which to go. And that was a trick to find people that could do that.

Q: Were they mainly young people?

Saff: They were young people.

Q: At that time, you're talking about the late sixties, right?

Saff: Correct.

Q: So at that time, multiples were huge. There was a lot of, as I recall, being sort of a kid, a teenager, that it was like Op artists and [Andy] Warhol and everybody was making prints. Everybody was—Jim Dine whom you worked with, too. Everybody was making prints and it was a whole new tier of art collecting.

Saff: It was just about the beginning of that. Really, it was just about the beginning. Because Tamarind didn't produce significant work with major people. And it was a good focus with June [C.] Wayne to resurrect stone lithography. It really wasn't until [Kenneth E.] Ken Tyler began to develop Gemini [G.E.L., Los Angeles] and guys like Jack Lemon [Landfall Press, Santa Fe] were around and Marian Goodman opened Multiples. And Una [E.] Johnson was at the Brooklyn Museum [of Art] beginning to collect prints from the more contemporary people. And of course, [Tatyana] Tanya Grosman was pestering these guys to go out to Long Island [Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), West Islip, New York] and to make lithographs.

My approach was—how do I just not become another print shop? I certainly wasn't going to be a custom shop, and I wanted to introduce something that was not—where you didn't know where prints left off and uniques began. There was specificity to printmaking, but I think Marian Goodman began to change that, too. She was sort of one of the unsung heroes—or maybe she is a sung hero—in terms of piecing together Claes [Oldenburg]'s drum set. And Ken was doing Claes's Chrysler [*Profile*] *Airflow* [1969] that came out of Gemini. There were some efforts to get off the wall as, I guess, Calvin [Tomkins] would say, with the prints. I did that with Rosenquist and began to work on a larger scale. And ultimately, with Lichtenstein and Bob, ended up making uniques with them because I had processes that were appropriate and proprietary, but appropriate to the content that they were using. So I guess the formalistic things that I was doing were—when appropriate, they were happy to co-opt it and use it to their end and basically, to my end as well. It evolved in terms of one artist to another. I guess that's the way artists get into galleries—basically through other artists often.

Q: Or collectors, yes.

Saff: Or collectors. But in terms of workshops, I think for the most part it's one person, at that time, talking to another person. It was an unusual time because everybody wasn't locked in. Things that we're talking about were not commoditized to the point that they became—and therefore, an artist could come down and take half the edition as their swag or make up some arrangement. We weren't talking about big numbers. They were prints, so they were—of course, I never used the term "multiples" because I wanted it to be sculpture. If it was a sculpture, it should be a sculpture, even if it was an editioned sculpture.

And Florida at that time, where I was working, was still a draw to people. They wouldn't mind coming down in the winter. Eventually it wasn't such a draw. Eventually, nobody wanted to leave their studio. Eventually, to get Roy to leave the studio, to get Bob to leave the studio, you had to have a rather valuable technique, or process, or idea that would, in a sense, seduce them to give up their work in front of that canvas or whatever to spend time going elsewhere. For Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein and others to go out to California—that still had the draw because it was L.A. For me to get people here—to get people to Florida—eventually was, I think, a product of "I have something that you can use and I'm the only place where you're going to find it."

Q: You have to get them excited about the prospect.

Saff: Right. And to get them excited, it had to be sort of an open-ended thing, especially with Bob. When I came up with how to transfer a digital image to plaster to do fresco, I had to be sure that—because I spent a lot of time with sort of research and development here to try and figure it out, and then to sort of back off the whole thing and provide him with an unfinished or incomplete understanding of the process. In a sense, while that's a gambit—and that negatively—it also did really work because he did bring a different approach to it, or did see things that we didn't see. So Bob made contributions to that, to a certain degree. But he wanted to do fresco and I had the process, and so that would draw him out to do a project, and I could repeat that story with any number of other processes.

Donald Saff and Rauschenberg working on *Party Line (Arcadian Retreats)* (1996), from the fresco series, in Rauschenberg's Captiva Drive studio, Captiva, Florida, 1996. Works in background are *Clave (Anagram)* (1995) and *Hell's Kitchen (Anagram)* (1996). Courtesy of Saff Tech Arts. Photo: George Holzer

Robert Rauschenberg
Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat), 1996
Fresco in artist's frame
111 x 75 inches (281.9 x 190.5 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan

Q: It seemed like there were a lot of very unorthodox or innovative processes, like the wax type.

Helio reliefs.

Saff: Don't know what that is.

Q: Cast resin. I was reading, also, that you had developed a photographically modified woodcut process.

Saff: Yes. Yes.

Q: Would you care to elaborate on any of those?

Saff: Oh, sure. With the photo-woodcut process—which was a great process—like many other things, I stumbled on it. I had been working with [Philip] Phil Pearlstein. Not a great Phil Pearlstein fan, but Phil Pearlstein was the first person I invited to Graphicstudio. And the reason I invited him is because that was Tampa, and that was ’60-something and you couldn’t find a more conservative situation. They did not allow nude models. That was not permitted. You could have models in bikinis, which was infinitely more seductive than a nude model. I was incredulous. So I gave the administration Kenneth [M.] Clark’s books, and it didn’t make any difference. So what I did is in starting Graphicstudio, I thought, “Okay, I’ll bring in this name. He’s going to do nude models. Let him deal with it.” So I brought him in. They had to deal with it. And with that, they were willing to change the policy, in terms of the students. I mean, I can’t believe I was in such a conservative location.

Fast forward a number of years, I brought Phil back and I liked him. I brought him back. He was heading to Jerusalem and I said, “Why don’t you do a very large print?” I wanted to have prints not only as—[Carl] Zigrosser wrote that book *Multum in Parvo* [1965], you know, “much in little”—and I came across that book because Chiang Yee, who was at Columbia University for

years, was somebody I studied with extensively. And he had a small little character that was illustrated by Zigrosser in that book, along with the [Hans] Holbein [the Younger]—the miniature small engravings—and the Dürers [Albrecht Dürer]. Anyhow, the concept was, instead of a portfolio-size art, I wanted these works to embrace the viewer—to surround the space around the viewer. So with Phil, I said, "Why don't you do a large woodcut?" Well, I had just been in China. I had been in China in '76, I think, for the first time, with a bunch of deans and museum directors. Seymour Slive was at Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts].

Q: At the Fogg [Art Museum].

Saff: Yes, at the Fogg. And Jan Fontaine, who was director of a Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. I went over at that time and got to see a lot of woodcut artists. And so I simply thought, because of my connections, I would then, years later, bring over a group of block cutters from China and put these people together. So what happened is, I'm still trying to figure out the logistics of getting people over, and this guy calls up and says he wants to show me his process. He was talking to an assistant of mine and I overheard the conversation. The conversation was, "I did the Vietnam [Veterans] Memorial [Washington, D.C.]—engraved all the names in the Vietnam Memorial." So my assistant says, dutifully, "He's busy now, can he call you back?" And I said, "I want to speak to this person." So she hands me the phone. He says, "My name is Luke Century and I put the names in the Vietnam Memorial and I do beautiful work in glass, and can I show it to you?" So I said, "Sure, come up." He was in Sarasota. So he drives up and he shows me some swans and whatever that he could put on glass and sandblast it. And I thanked him and I was driving back home and I thought, "My god, if you could do that in glass, you could do that

in wood. If you could do that in wood, then you could take an image on Mylar and make it as big as you want and as complicated as you want, and cut a block and then print from it. And then make multiple blocks, and easily register it." So I remember stopping off on Fifty-sixth Street in Tampa and calling one of the guys who worked for me and said, "I have the answer to how to do the Pearlstein."

Anyhow, it worked out beautifully. A photo process in which you could sandblast and make it as complicated as you want. Later, Jim Dine said he wouldn't use that. "Are you kidding? I'm not using that." Ultimately, he did use it in some of the big prints he did. Fell in love with it. And I tried to get Roy to do it because I could get the dots to register perfectly in woodcut, and all that. But we were busy with so many other projects that we just never got around to it.

Q: Did you use the process with Bob Rauschenberg?

Saff: [Pauses] No. No. Nope. I didn't offer it to him. I didn't offer him a few projects. I didn't initially offer him the wax. Had this great process of transferring images into wax. Eventually, I did offer it to him. I first went to Jasper Johns, and I remember I met Jasper on Houston Street [New York] and I showed him that I could print in wax. Not like Brice [Marden] did, but really with a thick impasto—layer it on and really make it tactile. And I remember Jasper sitting, looking at this thing—sort of a test piece, you know? He must have looked at it for five minutes. And he said, "I have no ideas right now for this thing. It's incredible." But he said, "I have no ideas." So then I went to Roy and he said, "I'll do a project with that." And I went up to see Dine—who was a pretty close friend at this point—and I showed him the process that I was

bringing to Roy and he says, “I’ll use it.” And I said, “I just promised it to Roy.” I took the ferry from Port Washington down to Long Island, went over to see Roy, and we started that project. He pitched the project that he was going to do with Gemini, gave it to me, and then did the *Imperfects* [*Imperfect Series,* 1988] with Gemini.

I didn’t show it to Bob. I had done some tests on screens, on metal screens. Subsequently, I did do a wax project with Bob [note: *Shale* series, 1994–95]. And again, it was like one of these things that was fortuitous. I was working on a Turrell project, wax was being thrown into a garbage pail and one of the guys came in with a piece of cardboard from the garbage that had wax on it, and it transferred letters from a newspaper that happened to be up against it. So I said, “This is perfect for Rauschenberg.” Took me about three or four months to figure out a way in which to do the technique. It never would happen once I set it up. But I did take that down to Bob and it was a great project.

Robert Rauschenberg
7-UP (Shales), 1994
Fire wax and transfer on canvas
48 x 36 x 1 1/2 inches (121.9 x 91.4 x 3.8 cm)
Made in collaboration with Saff Tech Arts, Oxford, Maryland
Collection of Ruth and Don Saff

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Saff: Were you down in Captiva?

Q: No, I have not been there.

Saff: Okay, so he had his giant studio and he has a beautiful swimming pool, and steps. And he sat out there in probably late summer, 4:30 in the afternoon, which means that there are lightning thunderstorms. And he sat out right by the swimming pool and there's lightning all around. I went to him and I said, "Bob, you know, you're going to get hit by lightning. Can you please come inside?" He said, "I don't care." And I was like, "Okay." I said, "Please come in." " I don't care." And this wasn't in reaction to the project. He was just down.

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He was just an absolute mess. It was always strange to me that with all of the drinking, he never compromised the art.

Q: David [White] spoke about that, too. He said that Bob could stay up late, he loved parties, he could drink vast amounts of liquor, sleep for a couple of hours. Then, if he had to be anywhere to talk to anybody, a critic, or an interviewer, or somebody calling on him to have a look at work—or for any purpose at all—game face would come on. You'd never know he had been under the weather moments before.

Saff: Absolutely. Absolutely. I've never seen it any other way than that. He was such a pro. I mean, when he had to perform, when he had to work a crowd, when he had to do anything, when he went to an opening, you'd never see him eat a thing—nothing. He may have a drink in his hand but he would never eat anything. He worked and he wouldn't be seen eating. He was a pro, you know? And he was full of focus on that. I mean, he was a great manipulator of his own career and his own persona and how he appeared. And he was always on stage and never compromised that position, ever—that I saw. Never. But it was always about Bob. It was always about Bob.

He used to love talking to me about my art history. For me to go to him and say, "Let me tell you about Julius II, okay?" I mean, he would love listening to that stuff. He would. And he was so strange because he didn't read. He hardly read anything.

Q: Yes. David told me he had severe dyslexia.

Saff: That's what they say. [Pauses] That's what they say.

Q: Elaborate, please.

Saff: Well, I can't elaborate. I mean, it's just, I know—

Q: He had no books.

Saff: What?

Q: He had no books.

Saff: He had books but he didn't read them. If he had dyslexia—I know he says he had dyslexia and he probably did but I'm never sure, you know, whether that was true. I know when you transfer images, like when he worked on the Dante pieces [*Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's* Inferno, 1958–60], things come out backwards and all of that but that is not dyslexia—that is a product of transfer.

Robert Rauschenberg
Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge, The Giants, from the series *Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*, 1959–60
Solvent transfer with colored pencil, gouache, and pencil on paper
14 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches (36.8 x 29.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Given anonymously

There's always a kind of packaging of the whole thing, which makes sense out of things. And so, yes, it would resonate with him to have images that go on backwards and whatever. It all is a complete modus operandi that works effectively. I'll accept the fact that he was dyslexic. I don't

know why he didn't read books. I think he might not have read books for other reasons. Maybe it just wasn't his *metier* or something. I don't think he read anything in any length, except Gertrude Stein. I spoke with him extensively about her writing.

The curious thing is that he was so informed about all of these areas and a lot of art history because he was a sponge through any other means. The television, as you know, was on all the time. He watched the soap operas all day long. He'd watch stupid game shows all day long. I mean, there's no difference—it's like the material you use. It's no judgment. You want game shows? You want soap operas? You want film by [François R.] Truffaut? You name it, it's all on, it all comes in. It all invades him by various means. And so, no, he didn't read a book but he sure was interested in anything you could talk to him about, and it stayed with him. His recall was remarkable. And for a guy who was dyslexic and whatever, he could kick ass in Scrabble with anybody.

Q: Interesting.

Saff: Very interesting.

Q: Spelling was not a problem?

Saff: Spelling was a problem.

Q: Oh. [Laughs]

Saff: Spelling was a problem and there was an arrogance in misspelling, too. He would misspell words when he wrote, mostly because his focus was on the ideas and the details of a particular word being misspelled was of no issue. But yes, he could spell if he had to. He could beat most in Scrabble. Of course, he did cheat. He did cheat once.

Q: How do you cheat at Scrabble?

Saff: I'll tell you how you cheat at Scrabble.

Q: You have a dictionary there. How do you—

Saff: Well, this is how you do it.

Q: Did he have his own special edition of *Webster's*?

Saff: Well, he knew how to beat some of these other people because what he did is, when they were in the Volkswagen bus traveling around Europe, Merce's Volkswagen,
John [Cage] was both looking at mushrooms and driving. The angle of the window in the Volkswagen was such that with Bob sitting in the seat alongside, he could see John's Scrabble letters. He was looking at reflections of things, and having a good old time, doing a little cheating in terms of—and he did that with poker, too, when he played with them. Because he loved to play poker early on. He didn't in later years. We used to play poker with Trisha [Brown]

and all of that. We'd all sit down and of course, it was silly. It really wasn't like we want to make money. Bob would take a handful of pennies and throw it in and bet and all of that. But he wasn't adverse to checking out, any way he could, to see what kind of hand you had. He did that with Merce and on that trip in that Volkswagen.

One of the more remarkable things was how he gathered the information he gathered, because I don't know anybody who was—or is—a better wordsmith than Rauschenberg. And that was used both positively or negatively. He could take the word you said and turn it on you somehow and make you feel horrible because you said it. He would take the alternative meaning and if he wanted to play games with you he would turn you inside out with what you said when it had no relevance to what your meaning was. But the word did have the possible meaning. He was great at that because he was so good at words. I don't know anybody else who could turn a phrase like he could. He was brilliant. He was absolutely brilliant. How that comes out of no reading, I don't know. But, yes, I don't know whether that's the elaboration you want but—

Q: Well, it's illuminating because it adds to what I was told by David about his particular way of verbalizing ideas— that he said was both extremely well crafted and, at the same time, could seem spontaneous. I didn't have the privilege of knowing him but, having heard the recordings, there is a particular cadence. There's a particular—not verbosity but there is a particular care.

Saff: There was a care and there's an inherent ambiguity in everything he said. In other words, it's like his syntax was a flexible syntax. If you go back and you look at Sanskrit, words were less finite and syntax more flexible. You could mean many more things. Castle is your home or a

castle is a chess piece—and he had a way of putting things together where they could mean many more things. But then, that's true of the art as well. The syntax—this flexible syntax with the objects, this open-endedness—was implicit in his work as it was in his language. It's a continuum, a really seamless continuum in everything he did. He was a very consistent person, relative to the arts and his language and his reading and his interests.

It was hard to get him to talk about other artists. It always interested me. You usually have an artist who's willing to talk about other artists. Speak to Rosenquist and—

Q: Oh, he does those terrific impressions of people.

Saff: Rosenquist?

Q: Yes.

Saff: He's wonderful. He does a great Jasper Johns. I mean, you name it. He can do great stuff. Rosenquist has opinions about other artists.

Q: Oh, yes.

Saff: Which he's happy to share with you.

Q: Oh, yes. I interviewed him a while back.

Saff: Go ask him about Jeff Koons. You know? He'll tell you about Koons.

[Laughter]

Q: Gerhard Richter was popular.

Saff: It just makes him crazy. And what the students are doing.

You never got that from Bob. You never got any of that from Bob. He was mute on all artists. The only one you had a sense that he liked was Rosenquist. He wouldn't talk about anybody else. And of course, Rosenquist, artistically, was, I guess, the least threatening to him. He always thought that Jim was angelic in appearance and motive and all of that. That he was sort of pure. I tried to get him to speak about [Pablo] Picasso, with everybody saying, "Rauschenberg is the last half of the twentieth century's Picasso." You couldn't get him to talk about Picasso.

James Rosenquist and Rauschenberg, Los Angeles, 1995. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen

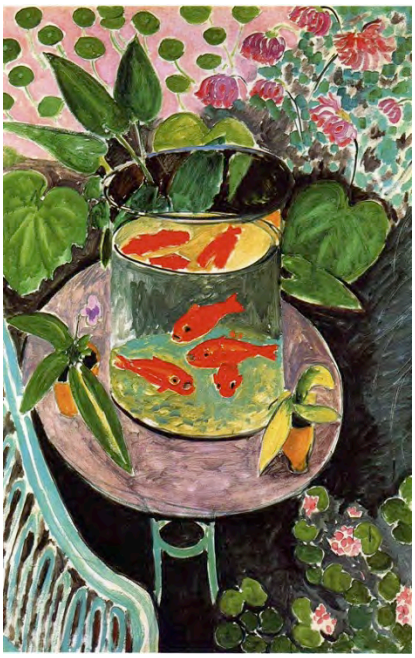
Q: Did they ever meet?

Saff: No. No. I could have him talk about [René] Magritte. And strangely enough, you would think that there would be an affinity toward [Kurt] Schwitters but his statements to me were dismissive of the relationship to Schwitters. Whereas he would talk about Magritte. Actually, you look at a Magritte—other than the sort of overwhelming Jungian and Freudian implications of some of that stuff—if you discard the easiness of surrealism and just look at the way in which he put disparate images together, you would begin to get closer to a Rauschenberg. I think that Bob met Magritte and he certainly purchased a number of Magritte works.

Q: Interesting. Were they on the muse wall?

Saff: Yes, they were, yes. He wouldn't go into great detail about Magritte but he certainly demonstrated an affinity for him. The only situation where I saw him truly moved by an artist was, we were in the Pushkin [State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow]—just the two of us walking through the Pushkin together—and we just looked at, which [Vincent] van Gogh was it? I think it was the "Prison Yard" [*The Prison Courtyard*, 1890]. We'd gone past that, looked at it. And I'm looking at these things and taking it in but I'm walking through this place with Rauschenberg. It's interesting—like, what's his take? And we turn the corner and there were two Matisses [Henri Matisse]—and that just knocked him on his ass. He just stopped in his tracks. I think one was an interior and I think the other one was a goldfish bowl painting. And he just was amazed by it and began to talk about it—about the strength of the color and the layout and the

design. It's the only time I've ever heard him talk both respectfully and passionately about another artist.



Henri Matisse
Goldfish, 1912
Oil on canvas
57 1/2 x 38 1/8 inches (146 x 97 cm)
Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

We had long talks about *The Great Age of Fresco*[: *Giotto to Pontormo*] exhibition, which took place at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art, New York, in 1968]. We both were quite taken with that. We didn't see it together and it was only years later that it came up, "Oh, you were at that show," and "You were at that show?" And we talked at great length. Bob never liked the idea of rehearsing. He was very taken with the sinopia drawings underneath the fresco and the fact that they would be so fluid by comparison with the finished image—which demanded the style of the time and the iconography of the time and whatever. Setting it up was more interesting than what the finished product was and so he was taken with that. Actually that eventually led to the developing of the fresco project that I did with him. I had purchased for him a Roman fresco as a

Christmas present, and then worked on how can I do fresco with him? Because I knew of his interest and that was a hook.

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

Those were the few things that he talked about in detail. I mean, would he talk about a Roy painting? No. Would he even sort of telegraph a positive or negative reaction to any work? No. I remember early on, a number of artists came to see him from California and it was very strange because he said to them, "You can't bring your California shit to New York and expect it to fly." Generally he would not do that but he could be pretty cruel to someone that thought a lot of himself. In his presence, that just wasn't going to work. He couldn't accept other people's egos. He had to have the last word. I remember when we were doing the catalogue cover for the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim Museum [New York] show [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, 1997–98] and they sent up some designers who made suggestions for a given work and a given layout that would be best as a point of sale approach to the catalogue. He just threw them out of 381 [Lafayette Street, New York]. "You're going to tell me how to design a cover? Get out."

And rightly so. So diplomacy wasn't necessarily his strength. I remember—David probably could tell you, David was present—[Charles F.] Charlie Stuckey was at his dinner table after an exhibition opening and had written very nicely about Bob but he just ripped him apart. He just—in conversation—cut him down to nothing.

Q: Why?

Saff: Because Charlie made a statement that suggested he understood his work and the interpretation, apparently, was incorrect to Rauschenberg. And Rauschenberg didn't let it pass. He decided to make this guy really feel bad. He wasn't opposed to doing that. He could be a damn mean Texan, let me tell you. He could be the meanest guy I've ever come across and the most generous person I've ever come across. Certain causes he would support—and friends who were really in need, he would give no end of help, both psychologically and financially.

Q: A leitmotif that I've begun to detect in a lot of his conduct, even in his work—and now you're talking about his use of language, too, and the way he would sort of absorb information was that his experience as a poor kid—Port Arthur [Texas] in the Depression years must have had an enormous impact on him in terms of shaping his view of the world. Or at least it was a starting point—when you hear how his mom knew how to get every piece of cloth out of yard goods to make shirts or underpants or whatever.

Saff: That's probably quite true, because there was no waste. There was no artistic waste. He certainly was the least frugal person I've ever come across. He didn't hesitate to go first class on

every level on anything he did, whether it was literally first class—and anybody who traveled with him enjoyed the benefits of that. But did he edit his work? No. Not the finished work. His editing went on as he produced it. I can't think of a work that was ever discarded. I can't think of him saying, "That doesn't work." I know in watching him work that there were times when he had to walk around the issue as opposed to frontally attack it and maybe had to come back to it a day or so later. And in those cases, sometimes I watched him look at something, and it didn't work, and it didn't work, and then he came back a day later and took one of those IBM pencils—you know, that you used to fill in the answers with, really dark—and draw a line across the painting. And all of a sudden, the composition came together.

I don't think that there was ever a person who could design a page better than Rauschenberg. I don't think anybody could. I'm sure that that care with the resources you refer to was implicit in what he was doing, as a lot of things came out of Port Arthur. The wheels came out of Port Arthur. What did he say? That the only way you could get out of Port Arthur was on wheels, and so you see wheels in his work on and on and on. I think his claim was it stemmed from that. How do I get the hell out of here? On wheels. And so wheels show up again and again.

There were many people who wanted him to produce less. I heard that another publisher, for example, at one point said, "Why don't you make fewer prints? They'll be worth more." And his reaction was, "As long as I'm alive and producing, I'm going to produce as much as I can. Everything else will take care of itself." He got very, very hostile to anybody who suggested that he either edit his material or hold back to produce greater scarcity. It just didn't happen.

Q: Or to try to develop or produce work along a certain theme that had been successful commercially.

Saff: That's something that he also was very careful about. There are huge numbers of works that are very accessible and maybe have an immediate impact and would be more commercially viable. And he would stop doing that. If you thought something could use a splash of paint so that it wouldn't be so constrained, he wouldn't necessarily do that, if that wasn't the issue that he was dealing with at the time. It's not where he was at the time. And he never compromised that, never compromised that.

You get people to want something. And it'd be very easy for him to go back and do it, and he wouldn't. It's like—Woody Allen jokes about, "We love your early work," and all of that. Of course, if it wasn't a silkscreen painting or a Combine, it was a hard sell. "We're not interested in those later works." It hasn't changed much. They're still saying they want the silkscreen paintings [1962–64] or the Combines [1954–64].

It's like a late Picasso when he died. Who wanted late Picasso until people really started looking at those works? David Hockney started writing about that, in terms of the quality of late Picassos, and people began to review that. Well, I don't think that that's happened yet with Bob. I don't think he's gotten a fair evaluation of the totality of his work. But he could easily have gone back to putting things together with spit and glue and string, as only he can, without making "early works." To a certain degree, I think that was a huge loss. Because he had a way—a tactile way—of putting things together that began to leave him by design, or otherwise. He

began to depend more upon people like Eric Holt and Lawrence Voytek and people who were really good craftspeople, who could produce slick and finished things. And somehow Bob was removed from a certain hands-on approach to it, which was, in part, compensated for in other ways. But those who wanted Rauschenbergs wanted the hands-on Rauschenbergs. It sort of left for a long while and really never returned. But then you look at some of the later works and some of them are hands-on in a different way, like the *Anagrams (A Pun)* [1995–97] or the frescoes [*Arcadian Retreat*, 1996]. They're gutsy. They're painterly. They're energetic. They are Bob in a different way. And whether they've been properly assessed—I don't think so. I don't think so, yet. I think he's incredibly underrated.

Robert Rauschenberg
Mirthday Man [Anagram (A Pun)], 1997
Inkjet dye and pigment transfer on polylaminate
123 5/8 x 180 3/4 inches (314 x 459.1 cm)
Collection Faurschou Foundation

Q: Isn't that always the problem with artists who achieve great stature when they're relatively young is that the period of impact, when they were influencing things—in his case, certainly, let's say the 1960s and seventies were the canonical works that a lot of people—you open the Barbara Rose book [*Rauschenberg*, 1987], or the magazines at that time, and the work that

everybody was interested in was the Combines and the silkscreen paintings. And perhaps as he evolved, the audience preferred the old Bob Rauschenberg because that was the history mark that they knew. Or maybe they just weren't able to keep up with him.

Saff: It's a conundrum, though, because the art world began to feel that if he didn't come up with something new that he was failing because that was Bob Rauschenberg; that defined Bob Rauschenberg. And the minute you had too many of one thing, that accusation, that invective started. You could have Jasper repeat the same damn thing again and again and it's called "refinement." With Bob it is mistakenly called "repetition."

Q: Or Ellsworth Kelly.

Saff: Ellsworth Kelly. Refinement. That's refining the image. With Bob Rauschenberg, there was always a pejorative, not a positive spin on it. Just, "He's lost it and he's just repeating himself." There were a lot of demands on that guy. That guy woke up every day with a big burden because of the expectation that people had of him. And of course, I mean, the variety of things he did, and the variety of interests—we haven't talked about that—was from technology to choreography to—it just goes on and on. The reach of his thinking was so great.

Q: How did he react to that? I mean, he must have been mindful of the audience. And how did he react? Did he share anything with you? Did he make any comments about how the critical audience or the art world was reacting to the work that he did as his life moved on?

Saff: What he would do is make a point of not talking about that. He would be very cautious, for example, not to read reviews. And he was an equal opportunity person when it came to reviews, so he would read neither the positive reviews nor the negative ones. So it's not as if he would be looking for positive reviews—"Oh, here's a positive review. Want to read it, Bob?" "Oh, put it down there." Maybe somebody, Bradley [J. Jeffries] or somebody would point out a phrase in here to him, and he'd look at it, but he basically insulated himself from that. He didn't want to know, or he didn't care, as he thought he was just in the right place. The more negative the review was, the more appropriate his work was.

The only thing he did say—and he said it publicly and it's been written about many times—is that if he went to the studio—and this is by statement. By observation, it may be different. But by his statement, when he went to the studio, if he felt that in any way he was repeating himself that it was time to stop and change and do something else. I think there is a certain amount of truth to that. So maybe that's a way of acknowledging the fact that the world wanted something new from Bob Rauschenberg all the time. And we used to laugh. Samuel Goldwyn, I think, said about critics that one shouldn't even bother to ignore them. And Rauschenberg—he lived that. And so I don't think he was susceptible to that, at least in a way that you could see. I don't know what went on, obviously, inside that complex brain.

Q: His chariness to be catty or disparage or praise other artists, in that sense, then, is consistent with his electing to not—

Saff: You mean in terms of not disparaging.

Q: Not disparaging, yes.

Saff: Right.

Q: Not disparaging. It's right.

Saff: But he was also a consummate politician. He was probably the best artist politician around since [Peter Paul] Rubens. ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, 1984–91] certainly testifies to how clever he was and why he did it and what the reasons were and what principles he held to. But no, he wouldn't go around saying anything negative. You couldn't fundamentally quote him being negative. Even the way he approached Abstract Expressionism—he wasn't necessarily a fan of that, but instead of saying, "Let's put that Abstract Expressionism and [Mark] Rothko angst aside." What does he say? He says, "I had too much respect for them to repeat what they were doing." It's like it's always—

Q: That's very smooth, isn't it.

Saff: He's so smooth. He's so smooth and so clever and so consistent that way. And then there's the other side to him.

Q: He was, for a time, on cordial terms with [Willem] de Kooning. Did he ever share any stories about him?

Saff: No, only that he was quite afraid of him.

Q: In what way?

Saff: Well, de Kooning was a big deal and he had a huge respect for de Kooning. And of all the people that he respected and who was important, to do that drawing by drawing with an eraser, if you will—

Q: Right. Erasing the de Kooning drawing [*Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953].

Robert Rauschenberg
Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953
Traces of ink and crayon on paper, with mat and hand-lettered label in ink, in gold-leafed frame
25 1/4 x 21 3/4 x 1/2 inches (64.1 x 55.2 x 1.3 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis

Saff: Yes, the only one. It could have been an erased whatever—an erased Franz Kline, or an erased whatever. But he had the most respect, I think, for de Kooning so it had to be de Kooning.

And yet he didn't say it that way. It comes out that way and if you read between the lines he would say that. He was often just very cautious, and even the people he worked with, he wouldn't judge. This person he worked with was not necessarily better than that person. But he also wouldn't give you five. Publicly, he was hatched from an egg. He didn't necessarily grow up in Port Arthur. He didn't necessarily have parents. He was this—

Q: Manifestation.

Saff: Whatever. Athena from whatever. He didn't owe anything to anybody—anybody, anything. Nothing. You showed him a technique—he'd never say, "That's a great technique." Get into a conversation with somebody—"Oh, yes, Lawrence [Voytek] showed me how to do such and such." It never ever came up. He would never ever praise anybody in any public way.

Q: Or disparage them.

Saff: Or disparage them publicly. Right.

Q: Except to their face.

Saff: To their face. He was incredibly cruel to the people who worked for him and incredibly generous. And they all stayed there and hung in with him. It was really quite schizophrenic to be around him.

Q: What would be a story that might illustrate his cruelty towards his workers, colleagues?

SECTION CLOSED UNTIL 1/1/2019

Saff: I remember somebody saying to him—he was about to have a performance. This person said, “Break a leg.” He went nuts. “Break a leg? I don’t ever want to hear that. I don’t ever want to hear that. How dare you say that stupid thing to me?” Okay, it’s out of a context, people say it. If you don’t like it, then there’s another way of letting somebody know that. You feel this big because all you’re doing is saying something that is traditionally said that he has—and maybe

rightly so—he has a different insight into that. He has a different take. He doesn't follow those traditions. He made his own tradition. And you don't say to this guy who's in a different context, "Go break a leg." But instead of conveying that to you, he'll mop the floor with you first. And so the person feels humbled, to say the least.

Q: Chastened.

Saff: There are many such instances as that, many such instances. Then, within an hour, he's giving you a kiss and has his arm around you. And you say, "This guy's really not so bad." And everybody stayed with him. Nobody left, basically, because he was Bob Rauschenberg, and so you went for the ride. A lot of the people that worked for him really had no career other than Bob Rauschenberg. His friends were the people who worked for him. They were the people he wanted to be around. The people he could control were the people he wanted to be around. He wasn't, other than these parties, a big socializer in that sense. The people he wanted to make decisions were basically inside people or gallery people he knew for years. But he came to dislike Leo Castelli. Then hated him.

Q: Why?

Saff: Why? Because Leo wouldn't really look at the work. He didn't like the way he looked at the work.

Q: How did he characterize the way Leo looked at the work?

Saff: Leo would come up to 381. Bob would have the work on the wall. First of all, Bob had this uncanny ability to hear any conversation at any distance simultaneously with any number of other conversations that were taking place.

Q: Oh, David talked about that.

Saff: You learn that early on. I can be talking to you and he's in that other room having a conversation with five guys, but he's listening to this conversation at the same time. I've seen it in action and it is incredible. Where was I going with this?

Q: You're talking about Leo Castelli coming to 381.

Saff: Leo Castelli, right. So Bob would be in 381. He'd be having a drink. He'd be talking to people. Leo would come up the steps and look at the new paintings. Wshhhhooo [indicates that he passed by the work quickly]. "Well, Bob, we have to have a show. We have to have an exhibition of these things." Well, he didn't look at them—not to Bob's satisfaction. Now, maybe he did. Leo's a quick study and all of that. But not to Bob's satisfaction. And the more Bob didn't like that situation, the more fault he would find. So it's hard to know whether Leo's quick study—if you want to look at it one way—or lack of interest or whatever caused the problem, or if it was simply an add-on to an already failing relationship. Bob did want out. And it was easy, actually.

By the way, he never felt that way about Ileana [Sonnabend]. And it's true. I watched Ileana look at his paintings. Ileana would come up and look at those same works and stand in front of them and fall into the work. All the while Bob would be watching. And that's not what Leo did. So his affection for Ileana relative to the work was unflagging. In point of fact, she was the taste behind Leo. She was the driving force, in terms of who really had the eye. I think Bob appreciated that and just the way she looked at the work. But Bob measured all these things—how you stood in front of his work and how you looked at it. It all got factored in. Nothing, nothing, nothing got lost. He was tuned in to everything simultaneously.

Ileana Sonnabend in Rauschenberg's Broadway studio, New York, ca. 1964. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: So he was easily offended if he felt someone was being dismissive or polite.

Saff: Oh, yes. Very easily offended. Oh, very easily offended. Yes, very easily offended. Very easily offended.

Q: Was it a chip on his shoulder, would you say?

Saff: No, actually not. Actually, he was just very vulnerable. And for the most part, I think he was up. For the most part, he didn't have angst. There wasn't a lot down about him. For the most part, he might be mean, but he was up and had a positive spin on things. But he suffered through situations—like Cy [Twombly] was supposed to show up for Thanksgiving and Bob cooked the meal and Cy never showed up. And it just killed him. It just killed him. Occasionally, he'd talk to me about it. "I cooked this meal and he didn't show up. He never had the courtesy to call." He just didn't understand why these guys—

Q: What happened, ultimately? Was it just forgetfulness?

Saff: —these guys couldn't deal with him anymore. They just couldn't deal with him. It was just overbearing. It's overbearing.

Q: So Twombly just didn't—

Saff: Enough is enough. Same with Jasper—enough is enough. And Jasper is a mean son of a bitch. And I saw Bob go over to Jasper at the Meyerhoffs [Robert E. and Jane B. Meyerhoff]. I was with Bob, and we walked over to Jasper together. Bob tried to be as nice and as gracious as you could be and Jasper just summarily dismissed him with really rude words and turning away and just walking away from him. There's certain things he could never mend. He'd try to. It's not that he didn't try to. He kept inviting Cy back. He kept trying to engage Jasper. But these guys had just had it. They weren't playing anymore.

Q: There was recently a published exchange, years ago, between Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol that was quite piquant. I can't quote it, but I'll have to try to find it and email it to you. Two very unpleasant people having a very unpleasant conversation. Oddly amusing to read. Happy I wasn't there.

Well, you've spoken about the meanness that Bob Rauschenberg could exert towards his friends and co-workers and employees, if I dare use that word, but you also characterize his outbursts as being like a Captiva tea storm that came and went, right?

Saff: Yes. I don't think vindictive would be a word I would use with Rauschenberg.

Q: These were outbursts.

Saff: Yes, very hurtful and very arrogant and almost capricious—based on mood. But there was no long term holding onto any one of these feelings. For the most part, he could let things go. He would let it go. So whatever the motive was, whatever the impulse was, two hours later he could be embracing you and engaging you in a conversation and singing your praises to you but not to others. I was always incredulous that people could work under these circumstances and deal with it. But I guess his reputation, the money, and the inevitable generosity—both financially and emotionally—is what kept people with him.

Q: Can you share any stories that would be illustrative of his kindness towards anyone?

Saff: There were people who were sick. One situation with a woman down there that had a ghastly illness and no money—he paid all the doctor bills. And he did so much of that stuff anonymously, not always to be acknowledged. He would help put people in business. [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi]'s wife [Agathe Gonnet] wanted to start a fashion design business in Paris, and so here's, whatever, three hundred thousand dollars, five hundred thousand dollars. There was no end to that kind of generosity of helping people. Somebody needed a house or the kid needed to go to school or whatever. You could go to Bob and ask him for help and he would help you. Or better yet, if you didn't ask him, he was even happier to help. And so being aware of people's plight and people unwilling to ask him, he would go ahead and offer. So there are situations in health—the organizational support of amfAR [American Foundation for AIDS Research].

But on an individual level, he was tuned into people's situation. I think that's why he created Change [Inc.]. That was sort of an example of that on a small level because of the small grants. But the purpose was, you have an emergency, you're not going to have to go through all kinds of red tape in order to get the thousand dollars you need because you need a root canal tomorrow because you're in pain. You got that money today. The relief of people's problems was something that, if he could do, he would do. And he'd do it very quickly and with a graciousness and kind heart and the right motives. Very, very, very unusual. I'm sure there are people like that. I don't know of anybody that matched what he did and the way in which he did it. It's like I started off—with Charles Foster Kane. He really is all of these things. And so when you think of him one way, you immediately see the other aspects of him.

Q: Citizen Rauschenberg.

Saff: Citizen Rauschenberg. Absolutely.

Q: Did he ever speak of his motivations or what inspired him or what continued to inspire him to do this? Change, Inc., if I recall, started fairly early, like 1970? And it was a bailout thing for artists and other people in trouble. Something comes up, you're going to lose your studio. Like you said, you need a root canal. They receive requests all the time and immediately act on them. So one would wonder—here's this man who can be extremely mean, volatile, emotionally abusive, and at the same time, enormously generous. Did he ever say anything to you about "I just wanted to help people—"

Saff: No. That was really what the magic was of the whole thing.

Q: He never spoke of it.

Saff: No. You're just aware of that because you know people and you know what he did. But he would never punch it up in lights. He would never—even in a casual way—would he talk about "I just want to help somebody." He would do it. It's just like the art. He just goes ahead and does. And it's straight ahead—never ever turns back. I never saw him back down from anything. Never.

Q: But you had seen him dance around things.

Saff: Dance around, yes. But you could never put a gun to his head and make him back down on anything, anything. I remember when we were doing the Guggenheim, and we were dealing with [Douglas] Doug Chrismas. And of course, Doug Chrismas has a long history. Actually, Doug Chrismas was interesting because Doug Chrismas was the guy who wanted Bob to do a world tour. That's how ROCI evolved—out of that—because he didn't want to do just a tour. He wanted a purpose as opposed to just doing a worldwide retrospective.

But relative to the Guggenheim show—we needed a place for the *1/4 Mile* painting [*The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, 1981–98]. And Doug Chrismas had that incredible gallery downtown. I don't know whether you remember it but it was just amazing. I think it was west a few blocks of West Broadway [275 Hudson Street, New York]. I forget the exact location but it was just incredible—and perfect for the *1/4 Mile* painting. And it got close to the opening. The painting was to go in there and Doug Chrismas wanted a separate poster other than the Guggenheim poster so that it would look like the show was just his show. So I had to negotiate that back and forth and we came to some sort of compromise in terms of the wording where it worked for him. Then he said as long as he was doing that he wanted a few works to be able to sell. Well, at that point, we weren't working with Doug Chrismas anymore. He'd screwed Bob enough on things—didn't pay and eventually had to give Bob a [Edward "Ed"] Ruscha and office furniture and all of that because he had sold one of Bob's works multiple times to different people.

Rauschenberg's *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–98) on view at Ace Gallery, New York, in conjunction with *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ellen Labenski © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

Q: An oft-told tale, alas.

Saff: Right, says, "I need a work. I want to have one to sell." It just wasn't going to happen. So Doug Chrismas said, "I'm canceling the show. I'm not going to have the show." It's right on the eve of the Guggenheim opening. So I told Bob, "Bob, he wants a work to sell. He's going to cancel the show if he doesn't get one." And Bob said, "Nobody's going to hold a gun to my head. Let him cancel the show." And I called Doug. I said, "You can't hold a gun to his head. It's not going to work. What do you want to do?" "Well," Doug said, "I'll have the show." That's the way Bob always worked. I just never saw him back down from anybody or anything. Yes, the occasional apology when it was in his interest to apologize. But for the most part, he knew what he wanted to do and it was straight ahead. Straight ahead, which was fantastic. I had never seen that in anybody else. It wasn't in a destructive way. You could go this way. You could go that way. You could make an argument for an alternative approach. But once he made up his mind he never backed down—a rather unusual characteristic.

Q: Well, the dichotomy, in a way, of his working method of sort of dancing around, maneuvering, addressing things from a kind of poly-focal, open kind of process—and at the same time, this determined, forward moving—it's intriguing. I mean, I think he's inventing the methods he's using as he's working, right? He's finding things here and there, and improvising, and ambushing himself, in a way. Trying to create surprises every day in the studio. But at the same time moving forward. It's a very rare quality, I think, in an artist, to be able to maintain those two activities at once.

Saff: It didn't always produce consistently high-level work.

Q: Well, of course not. There's a research aspect—a lot of it's research.

Saff: It's interesting to see that none of the work was pitched in terms of its quality because obviously the quality didn't go below a certain level—relative to Rauschenberg's quality is what I'm referring to. He might have edited himself, but on the other hand, you can't have an accepting philosophy and then begin to use a set of references or evaluations with your work that is not accepting.

So they were all his children, one way or another. Some may be handicapped in a certain way—others exquisitely accomplished—but fundamentally all his children. And therefore there was no hierarchy between them. There was no hierarchy financially between them, too. In other words, you could say, "I've just created a masterpiece." You know when you hit it. He had to know when he really hit it. But it ended up being sold by the square inch or not sold at all. It never was

any other way. If a work of art was in the ballpark of X number of dollars, then everything else was calculated, basically, on the square inch price. But nobody talks about that.

Q: No, of course not. But that was the way, I think, that a lot of galleries and a lot of the dealers used to calculate price: medium, process, and size.

Saff: Right. And you'd have to. Otherwise, you're making the value judgment going into that. It's a different story now, maybe, in terms of pricing his work, but for him, fundamentally, either it wasn't for sale because it was really important to him, or it was just strictly by the square inch.

Q: So he's watching his mom cutting up patterns for shirts.

Saff: Right. Right. That's right. Exactly.

Q: That's very intriguing. Again, this leitmotif of the Depression kid keeps popping up for me everywhere. The more I learn about this man, the more I—because I knew people of that age, too.

SECTION CLOSED UNTIL 1/1/2019

Q: Scandinavian.

Saff: —Scandinavian, or a combination. Whatever. And that was never there with Bob. I mean, there was a largesse with Rauschenberg, which you'd think that the cornucopia for everything was right in his studio. I mean, just nothing. Nothing was held back. Ideas, indulgence, drinking, quality. Also, I don't know anybody who was a better chef than Bob Rauschenberg. I don't know anybody who could cook like that. I don't care what restaurant you take me to. He just was remarkable that way.

Q: Well, a lot of historians and critics spoke about how he blurred the lines between the traditional studio genres of drawing and painting and sculpture. And even now, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation—if you have a look at all of the ring binders and so forth, they're organized paintings, editions, I think, and drawings. But even there, it includes a lot of permutations. David [White] and I talked the other day about the catalogue raisonné. We're sort of pondering the problems of what do you do with editions where he would have a hundred prints and he would go and start making marks on individual prints, or changing individual impressions, so that they're each an individual piece. They're no longer multiples.

Saff: That was one of his purposes—a purpose. I participated early on in such an experience with him, in a series called *Crops* [1973]. At that point, I only had Tamarind-trained printers here. I got the most flexible of them, but there was still that attitude that they knew how to make a proper lithograph, you know? Bob came up from Captiva and we did this series of, I think, five "editioned" works, in which he transferred newsprint to a large sheet of paper. Well, how do you do an edition with that process? He made the five images and then basically threw down

newspaper for each of—let's say the edition was forty or fifty—in sort of the same way. And so they sort of look the same way, but he made each one unique.

Robert Rauschenberg
Peanuts (Crops), 1973
Silkscreened gesso and solvent transfer
60 x 38 inches (152.4 x 96.5 cm)
From an edition of 20 Roman numerals and 20 Arabic numerals, published by Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa

He did not like to leave the printer left with a project to complete in his absence. He wanted to be part of everything. Bob wanted in on everything. So how do you not just walk away and give the printer this job? How do you maintain a relationship, both with the printer and the process? You do something that requires you—the artist, Bob Rauschenberg—to participate in every work. So he laid every one of these things out and each one was a variation on a theme, basically. Then he numbered the works as an edition. And one of the printers said, you know, "How do you put edition numbers on this?" 1/40, 2/40? And the printer said, "It's not right." Bob said, "It's the idea that's consistent and therefore it's an edition." What he was basically saying is that you

don't have to slavishly adhere to the ultimate perfection in making a replicated image. The idea was the more profound issue than was the ability or craftsmanship in making sure that everything looked exactly the same.

So he was always palpating the limits, always palpating the limits. "This is an edition," "I'm going to break the concept of an edition." And that is—I hate to say "maverick" because of that son of a bitch Senator—but Bob legitimately was. There was nothing that was a given for him. If you made a statement, he would find the alternatives that would disprove or complement whatever you were saying. Nothing was a given.

Q: Well, take us into the studio for a day. Let's say you're working on an edition, as he defines it. What kind of interactions would you have with him? What kind of conversations would go on? What kind of banter back and forth, brainstorming, talking about pursuing options, weighing possibilities? Sketch out a day for us. Or an afternoon.

Saff: Well, it was usually at night. You'd saunter over to the studio or come here, and he'd have his colorful handkerchief in his back pocket, generally followed by his dogs and the entourage of support staff. The television goes on. He's working on a given work and the conversation is not about the work. The conversation is about some art history thing, some painter—[Giovanni] Bellini, Holbein—generally more Renaissance and Baroque artists.

Donald Saff and Rauschenberg working on *Washington's Golden Egg / ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)* (1990) in Rauschenberg's Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1990. Courtesy of Saff Tech Arts. Photo: George Holzer

Q: Old masters.

Saff: Right, old masters. Safe stuff, but stories about them that he wanted to hear, you know? Stuff that's not a specific analysis or an iconography. Sometimes iconography of a given work. If you're telling him what [Erwin] Panofsky said certain things meant in a Dürer, he was quite interested in that. Or what the Maximilian Arch [Dürer, *The Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I*, 1515]—and so the conversation was basically about that. As he would take from this giant palette of images, and piece things together and he'd look, he'd look intensely at things and stand there and stand there and look. And then place an image down, rub the back, and it was like a—I don't know. He had a way of sort of caressing things that was sort of sexy, in a way. It really was very sensual. It wasn't about should I do this or do that or whatever. It was just a continuum. He functioned on one level while there were all of these other stratas of information from television programs to banter, jokes, to conversations about art history, and so forth. So you don't find him searching for things as he's working.

Q: So not a discussion about the work at all?

Saff: No. No.

Q: So what kind of jokes did he tell in the studio?

Saff: I mean, he didn't tell jokes in that sense.

Q: There weren't stories with punch lines?

Saff: No, no. It was never that. It was always this picking up a word that could be flipped around and it becomes funny in a different context. So it was just word manipulation. That's what his jokes were, that I ever heard. It was like, I mean, it was the manipulation of words that could be held against you, because you used it improperly—but it could be very funny when benign. If he heard something and he wanted to use it positively then it became really funny because it's like a verbal quantum leap that he can make. It's really sort of Einstein-ian, you know? He had a way—he had this gestalt information within which he could make these jumps and take you with him, so you saw things in a completely different way. And oftentimes it was really quite humorous because you didn't think a word could be used that way, or it was a pun in the most generous, positive way you could talk about it being a pun. And so I mean, for me, the humor was always that. The humor was in his language. That's where the humor was. I don't recall him telling jokes or even relating stories that way because he didn't relate stories.

Q: Did you hear the one about the nun and the rabbi?

Saff: No, no, no. Like a midget walked into a bar, something like that. No. That wasn't what he did. He was busy either talking about himself or talking about a show that he has to have, or what a layout should be. Or playing word games. Just word games. This is all from an illiterate guy.

Q: A lot of people who do that—a lot of people I've known in the past generally—have a few pet stories or a few pet verbal stunts that they'll trot out for somebody new on the scene. Somebody joining the entourage for a weekend—

Saff: Oh. Well—

Q: And have you examples?

Saff: No.

Q: No?

Saff: No.

Q: He never—

Saff: No. There was no repeat.

Q: —repeated himself?

Saff: No. No. No, there was no routine. There was no routine.

Q: There was no pattern?

Saff: No. There was no routine.

Q: There was not a Citizen Rauschenberg pattern? It didn't happen?

Saff: No. It just—

Q: It was always just—

Saff: It was adjusted to the situation and always a product of the context. There was nothing out of context, and so therefore, as the context changed, his reaction to the context and what he conveyed always changed.

Q: A nimble fellow.

Saff: Nimble fellow. Maybe a product, in part, of [Josef] Albers, you know? I mean—

Q: How did he speak of Albers to you?

Saff: Very positively. Curiously, very positively.

Q: Anything specific?

Saff: Well, he would talk about him being a taskmaster, which he appreciated. And it's really strange, because I would have thought that there would be antipathy. But no, he talked about him positively, and he talked about color, Albers's color. It was sort of almost on point with what we were just talking about—that there are no absolutes out of context. That red is only a given red—given the context of the field against which that red is held. And that's something that he learned from Albers. And though it had specificity in terms of color, it had generality in terms of his working methodology and his thinking. I think that he was, in a sense, a product of applying that to all of his life and artistic situations. So, no, I can't think of Bob with "I've heard that one before." His approach to all people coming in was specific to the situation. That's his strength and so he's going to show it off. He was something new every day. He was something new every day.

Q: Interesting about Albers because he studied with Albers at Black Mountain College [North Carolina] before Albers went to Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut]. But the way you were describing Albers, the specificity and the generality—I mean, that also perhaps goes to

illuminating Rauschenberg's ability to both move forward and dance around at the same time—the indirect and direct at the same time.

Saff: Yes and I think he realizes he got a lot out of Albers.

Q: It was only a year he was there with him, or something?

Saff: I know, but the impact must've been tremendous because just the way he talks about—he would talk about him always in either—negative about his work, which then crystallized his thinking about his own work. So even in Albers being negative produced a positive result—as teaching often does. To crystallize your thinking because you're parrying a teacher's statement is an educational approach to learning. Apparently, Albers gave him content and Albers gave him something to resist.

Q: Well, that rigor and that—

Saff: Right. And resist he did. Right. He didn't like that. He didn't like that discipline. He didn't like that rigor. He didn't like any of it. And certainly, he was capable of rigor. He was capable of drawing. He was a good draftsman. I mean, in the context that we'd say traditional draftsman. Clearly he was a draftsman in other ways, too, but he certainly could draw. And he didn't go down that road beyond the early paintings that were in his house, and that he did as a student, and that papered the walls of the house during hurricanes and all of that, with the mother—

Dora Rauschenberg with her "storm shutters" made from Rauschenberg's early paintings, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1992. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Oh, that great story about the bikinis, right? He did nudes, and the mother made him put bikinis—or made him put bathing suits on them or something?

Saff: Well, that, and she did use the paintings when a hurricane was coming through Lafayette [Louisiana]. She did take some of the old paintings and block the windows with them. And when he asked her about it, she informed him that she made sure that the paintings were faced inside because it was embarrassing for people to be able to see them. So not only did she use the work for that, but she further censored it by having it face inside. He loved it—I mean, he had great affection for his mother. He claimed his father said on his deathbed—that, his final words were, "I've always hated you."

Q: Really?

Saff: Yes. And he told me that any number of times. "My father said on his deathbed—his final words were, 'I've always hated you.'" And so that story lasted a long time, you know? And you understand why he was, in part, what he is.

I was in the hospital room with his sister down in Fort Myers [Florida]—some of the final days. I was sitting there with her and I said, "Is it true that your dad told him that he always hated him on his deathbed?" She said, "Absolutely not." She said, "I was there when he died and I was with Bob. He never said anything like that and he never would say anything like that."

Q: Print the legend. So it was part of his own myth.

Saff: Somebody's not telling the truth. Or somebody remembers things incorrectly. Bob made his own history. Bob made his own history. University of Texas [at Austin]—you know, why did he leave the University of Texas? Why? Do you know?

Q: Refused to dissect a frog.

Saff: Precisely. Turned all the frogs loose. Not only did he refuse to dissect them, he turned them loose.

Q: Turned them loose?

Saff: Turned them loose. Fact or fiction? And left the university because of that. Came out of the Navy, no forwarding address from his parents. Couldn't find them for a while.

Q: Oh, I hadn't heard that.

Saff: Fact or fiction?

Q: Legend.

Saff: Legend. Goes to New York, gets to Newark [New Jersey], listens to the train master saying, "Newark!" Gets off thinking he's in New York and is asking for two days, "Which way is the Empire State Building?" "Over there," people would say. So for two days, he walked around Newark, looking for the Empire State Building because people said, "It's over there." That's the story he told.

Q: Legend.

Saff: There are a lot of those stories.

Q: Since we're using analogies from the history of motion pictures like *Citizen Kane* [1941, directed by Orson Welles], we might as well bring in Akira Kurosawa and say it's like *Rashomon* [1950]. It's his—

Saff: —Yes. It is like *Rashomon*.

Q: —his version. All of them are like *Rashomon*. In other words, he's his own *Rashomon*. Why do you suppose he was so eager to distance himself from—I don't want to say honesty. I can't presume that he was not honest—but there seems to be a protective disposition towards people around him, keeping everybody off balance. Dancing around things, moving straight ahead. Multiple versions of the same story. Crafting his own narrative, as you said. You know, he was a very adept politician. Sounds like he created his life the way he created his art.

Saff: And believed in both. I think he believed all these things eventually. That which was maybe fleeting, in terms of a story, and the discomfort with his father—I'm sure the relationship was not a healthy one—then sort of spirals into this specificity of a deathbed statement. I think it's all his creativity. His fertile mind that creates a story in an environment, and just the whole thing about seeing [Gainsborough] *The Blue Boy* [1770]? You read that, yes? Where—

Thomas Gainsborough
The Blue Boy, 1770
Oil on canvas
70 5/8 x 48 3/4 inches (179.4 x 123.8 cm)
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California

Q: Well, tell the story again.

Saff: Well, he saw Gainsborough as a boy in a painting in a book, and he was so ignorant about what painting was that his notion of it was an illustration in the book. And it wasn't until when he was in the Navy, and he visited the Huntington [Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California]—

Rauschenberg in his U.S. Navy uniform, ca. 1944. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Yes. Huntington Library.

Saff: Then he saw the actual painting. That was the catalyst for his engaging in art—because it was so much greater than he ever anticipated and it was an epiphany for him to see that.

Q: He told you this?

Saff: Yes, he told me that. Yes. It was, for him—to have existed with this work as a black-and-white illustration, and to see a full-blown painting of this subject at the Huntington was an epiphany. He just realized that art was something magnificent and not a black-and-white illustration in a book. It was specifically that work, which turned his head.

Q: How did he get the idea, a kid from Port Arthur, Texas in the Navy, working in a mental ward, going to L.A.? A lot of people who were stationed in San Diego were heading the other way—go looking for trouble and companionship and alcohol. And he goes to Los Angeles and ends up in the Huntington Library. How did it occur to him to go there?

Saff: [Pauses] I don't know. I guess it takes god and a psychiatrist to know that but I think—

Q: Well, I mean, he didn't share—

Saff: No, no, no.

Q: —how it was he ended up there?

Saff: No, he didn't. I don't recall the details but he did relate stories, and I wish I had written those down. Stories about his very clever approach to these mentally disturbed Navy people that he had charge of—taking them out and doing innovative things with them and having them rise to a new level of consciousness and sensitivity and all of that. Bob related some of the methods

he used and they were innovative methods, even in today's terms—and a product of someone who was innately aware of the human condition and the needs of people—incredibly sensitive to that. And so if you're looking at a person who has that kind of sensibility, as described by his handling of those patients, it would seem to me that this implicit sensitivity would find an outlet in the expression of art.

Q: And philanthropy.

Saff: And philanthropy, yes. And philanthropy. I don't know what the subject of [Thomas Lawrence, *Sarah Barrett Moulton*:] *Pinkie* [1794] or *The Blue Boy* meant to him, whether it was subject matter or just strictly in coming to grips with what painting is—what the possibilities of paintings are by comparison to an illustration in the book.

I remember reading in [Bernard] Berenson's great book on the Italian Renaissance, when he had all—originally—I don't know, I haven't looked at it lately—but all the paintings were in black-and-white and the statement was that he didn't want anybody to ever get the feeling that they've actually seen the painting—that's the way Berenson's book starts. I understood that relative to Bob because he was misled that way. No, he wasn't misled that way, but he just didn't know that there was an alternative. He didn't realize that there was an alternative. So I don't know whether it was just fortuitous, whether he walked into the Huntington Library because he wanted to be surrounded by the flowers that were around him or—

Q: It's a gorgeous garden.

Saff: Right. And his sensitivity to that must have been there because it was always there from the time that I knew him. This sort of love of animals and flora, and he's just so caring about all of these things. To see him surrounded by his dogs—I always remember the dog being around. And they're always an integral part of his life.

Rauschenberg working in his Untitled Press print shop with his dogs Kid and Cloud, Captiva, Florida, 1977. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: I understand that you have some extremely talented dogs?

Saff: Yes, I have talented dogs. Yes, I do.

Q: Have you ever had them on [*The Late Show with David*] *Letterman*?

Saff: No. I could. I have a savant dog that I thought was a hopeless cause because I trained my dogs in agility and she was hopeless. But one day I was standing there next to the steps, which she had difficulty negotiating and she walked up the steps backwards. And it started from there. I found that she was just absolutely glitched and she had to walk up steps backwards, but she was capable of taking things out of closets, putting them in boxes, going back, closing the closets, walking the other dog, the smaller dog, and on and on and on. I've always been involved with those. It was always interesting for me to see Bob's relationship with his dogs.

Q: Yes, talk about that a little bit.

Saff: Well, he didn't train the dogs. I train my dogs. I make them into—if I can—into something. I train them to do agility, I train them to not walk into a room before I do, and not push—

Q: Mow the lawn, et cetera, right?

Saff: If I could, I would.

[Laughter]

Saff: It's not what Rauschenberg would do. He wouldn't do that. I remember once, him coming to the house and my son had my dogs do something—not as a trick—but asked them to do something. And he said, "He doesn't know anything about training dogs." And I just let that go. I was like, "What the hell does he mean by that?" I thought about that. How can he make a

judgment like that? But I think his judgment was strictly that you allow these animals to, as much as possible—without them destroying your house or your life or whatever—have their own life and operate at whatever level they're going to operate at. So he didn't interfere with what they did. They were just other people around. Not "Sit!" "Stand!" "Go!" whatever. Nothing like that. They were an extension of his philosophy of let people do what they want to do. Let things happen the way they're going to happen. Let things unravel the way they ought to unravel. That everything is—and I think I wrote an article about him stating, "It Is as It Should Be"—I think was the way I titled it. [Note: In *Rauschenberg*, Heland Wetterling Gallery, Stockholm, 1990. Expanded and reprinted in *Rauschenberg: Day Lights and Night Sights*, Mandarin Oriental Fine Arts, Hong Kong, 1994.] And that, I think, was his philosophy. It is as it should be. I mean, yes, if you're ill, he'll try and help, but that is as it should be—that he should try and help. It's incredible acceptance, you know? It's really quite Eastern, quite Eastern. That's also got to come, in part, out of Cage. I think that Cage either reinforced that or Cage was there and became a friend because it was—

Q: The chance operations and—

Saff: Yes. The *I Ching*, whatever. It's like all of that was really the way in which Bob operated. And it all fits together and reinforces one another.

Q: What were the names of his dogs?

Saff: Laika was one.

Q: Oh, right. That was the cosmonaut pooch, right? Named for the first canine in outer space.

Saff: Cloud.

Q: What was the breed of each, two? Laika was a—

Saff: Oh. Early on they were all mixed breed.

Q: They were all mutts.

Saff: Yep. Then he had a dog by the name of Star, who was an aggressive Alaskan kind of—

Q: Husky?

Saff: A Husky.

Q: A Samoyed, one of those.

Saff: A Samoyed. And then it began to be a designer's decision. There was the occasional mutt—and then everything became white. Of course, everything was white for Bob. Everything. Every wall had to be white and eventually the dog had to be white. Everything was tabula rasa. The paintings, the *White Paintings* [1951], the dogs became white. Everything was white.

Everything was pure, everything was a clean slate on which you began to work. And actually, I never thought about that. Bob never painted a color on his wall. I remember when I told him that [Arnold] Arne [Glimcher] was painting the walls of the gallery a medium gray and he just went nuts. He just went nuts. I was so concerned because I ended up having to tell him that.

Robert Rauschenberg
White Painting [four panel], 1951
Oil on canvas
72 x 72 inches (182.9 x 182.9 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: Arne Glimcher?

Saff: Yes. And we're going up to the gallery and of course, these were works that—in this case—that I made with Bob. These were the frescoes that I made so I was part owner in these works. I owned fifty percent of them. It was my process and they were uniques. And Arne was showing them, which was incredible because Arne was successful in placing works. [Note: PaceWildenstein, New York, *Robert Rauschenberg: Arcadian Retreats*, 1997] Prior to that, showing art at Larry's [Lawrence Gagosian, Gagosian Gallery, New York], the works were difficult to sell. Arne got in just at the right time.

And so Bob was pissed as we went uptown to have a look. “He painted the walls a color. I don’t want it painted a color. That’s going to have to change.” “Can’t change. It’s been painted. Let’s go up and look at it.” We went up and looked at it. And Bob loved it. He loved it. And so it’s unusual—as I told you before, Bob never backed down—but he would defer to a better idea. The walls remained a color.

Q: Right.

Saff: He was capable of changing his mind when appropriate. And so it’s to his credit that he “backed down.” It’s to his credit that he was capable of changing when he was confronted with something that worked for him. And it did work. Arne did a great job. The colors worked with these works and Bob accepted it.

So that was a deviation from the white. But if you went to the studios or anything, the studio’s white, the furniture was white. Everything was white. The floor was white.

Q: David talked about how Bob Rauschenberg had sort of an allergy to furniture, too, and didn’t like having a lot of stuff cluttering his living space. How did that work with dinner guests? I guess you’d have to have a table and chairs and—

Saff: It’s an interesting thing, because my thinking about that is that— Well, he was a purist. So we have a purist—everything’s white and all that. There’s not much room for decorative

furniture—all of that would distract. But over the years, you know, twenty some odd years, you get to realize that you're always uncomfortable being there. You're never comfortable, always uncomfortable. You can't find a place to really plop down and sit and enjoy yourself. The dinner was, early on—in the old house in the early seventies—you had some beanbags on the floor, white beanbags. And you had crappy bar stools, which stuck into your rear end in ways that you didn't want it to. You were constantly uncomfortable and I don't know if there was a method to that. It was easier to stand up and look at the work that was always hanging on the wall than sitting on your derrière and becoming complacent. You couldn't physically become complacent in his place. Years later, you sat on stools that got a little more comfortable as time went on, but they were never really comfortable.

Rauschenberg and Donald Saff among others eating in Rauschenberg's Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1974. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: And you had your knees for a table.

Saff: You had a counter top. There was a counter top. But in the old house, it was barely large enough for two people, and the rest of the people did have your knees as a table, sitting on a beanbag on the floor, and waiting until 3:00 in the morning or 2:00 in the morning to go over to the studio to begin work. You were always off balance. He always kept you off balance. And so, yes, it's a purist approach to this clean space. But there was another psychological element to it.

Q: Intentionally dysfunctional.

Saff: I think so. I do think so. Other people would just say he had an aversion to furniture. I say he had an aversion to furniture and there was a method to keeping people uncomfortable and keeping their attention on him. The attention had to be on him.

Q: There's a great story about how Admiral Hyman Rickover had removed, in his office, half an inch from the front legs of all of the chairs in his office except for his own, so that the chairs didn't seem to be akimbo, but when you sat in them you were necessarily leaning slightly forward, towards him.

Saff: Well, the analogy to that, or whatever, would be that Rauschenberg never sat. He would never sit down.

Q: Always on his feet.

Saff: Always. He was always on his feet. You were always looking up to him. Obviously, you go in the studio and you're working and standing up and so forth—that's a different story. But when you were having dinner or when you were schmoozing beforehand or in the house, he stood. In later years he began to sit when he became more infirm, but basically, you were amazed that he had the stamina hour after hour after hour to be on his feet. And of course, his stamina was just incredible. I mean, the days in which he used to fly over to Europe—people would talk about it. He would fly over to Sweden, say, to a show at Wetterling [Gallery, Stockholm], or somebody, or a group exhibition when Pontus Hultén was putting on a show. And he went over with all the guys. The only one who was up all night was Rauschenberg. He never sat down in the plane, in the seat, if he could. He was standing up, he was drinking, and he never fell asleep. You just didn't ever see that. He was always the first one standing and the last one standing. And he wasn't eating and he was focusing on business—and the business was Rauschenberg.

Q: After we just concluded, you shared a story that I think was very revealing, and illuminated in another way, part of Bob Rauschenberg's character. We were talking about how you're never comfortable—one was never comfortable in his domestic environment. And that everybody was eating on beanbags or bar stools, and how he never sat down. He was always on its feet. But do you think that that was as much because he was reluctant to allow himself to be at ease?

Saff: I don't think he was reluctant to be at ease as much as it was important for him to remain creative and active. So you couldn't be creative and active sitting down in a chair and having a conversation, necessarily. He wasn't [Marcel] Proust. You had to be up on your toes and tuned into everything at the same time. You can't be passive. And so he was, in a sense, never passive.

And that, then, puts him into a juggling act. How do you court people? Sometimes you want to. How do you get close to them? But how do you keep them sufficiently at bay so that it doesn't interrupt the flow of your thinking, of your creativity, or your focus? And so you have this combination of personalities that you're confronted with. You have a person who's cooking a gourmet meal and talking about it and telling you what he's putting in it, and whatever. At the same time, you're uncomfortable waiting for the meal to be served, which, by the way, is served at some ungodly hour, when you're starving to death at that point because you've just had some peanuts put out for you beforehand. You're waiting and waiting and waiting, and you're waiting to conduct business, even. And it's all put off. Everything is delayed. And you're in a constant state of being in the anteroom of ideas and agreements. And this is some sort of play that goes on while, as I said before, there's this gracious meal being offered. It's being offered late and you're uncomfortable. You haven't done your business and so you're appreciative of one thing, and some of the clever conversation and word games and all of that. At the same time, you want to get on with it.

And as I related, I thought about it when I was looking for that apartment in New York, and the real estate agent shows me an apartment where there's a great kitchen and lousy windows, tiny little windows. And then a place with a pathetic kitchen and floor to ceiling windows, and I say, "Why can't you find something that has everything?" And she said, "You know, God gives with one hand and takes with another." And I thought, this is exactly what Bob did, and Bob is—he is this deified character, who graciously makes you the beneficiary of this extraordinary art, and sometimes consumes you, in terms of your thinking and your information and your personality—at the same time. And conversely, he can switch everything around and give you more than he

takes, and you're never quite sure what the formula is at a given moment. But that there are two sides to the coin is inevitable with him. You don't get the good without the pain, and you don't get the pain without the good. And he offered up both in a very generous way.

Q: One could always expect to be surprised.

Saff: Surprised. Happily—and unhappily—surprised.

Q: There was a quote from the interview with David, where he was quoting Barbara [Bertozzi] Castelli, saying, there was a piece that came into the gallery, or that was hanging somewhere, and somebody was trying to talk about it. Anyway, the punchline was, "Well, if it isn't full of—" and I don't think the word was confusion, I'll have to go back and look at the exact word, but he said, "If it's not perplexing, it's not a Rauschenberg."

Saff: Right, and that's true of all of the wording. If you could say, I work in the gap, and the full quote, and you think that is a great insight. Explain to me exactly what that means. You know? The statement that tries to clarify his philosophical approach to working is just as perplexing as the work itself. So there's always a continuity. There's no closed idea. It's all open. Everything is left open for interpretation. You are always a participant in Rauschenberg's life and his art. You're never passive. You can't be. He doesn't allow you to be passive. He doesn't give you answers. He just gives you questions. [Note: Rauschenberg's original statement, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" In Dorothy C. Miller, *Sixteen Americans*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959.]

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: 3PM | Session #2

Interviewee: Donald Saff | Location: Oxford, MD

Interviewer: James L. McElhinney | Date: August 16, 2013

Q: This is James McElhinney speaking with Donald Saff at his studio workshop in Oxford, Maryland, on Friday the sixteenth of August 2013, at roughly 10:12 AM. Good morning.

Saff: Good morning. Good morning.

Q: Prior to turning the machine on, I was sharing some of the insights or commentary that David White had shared about Bob Rauschenberg and keeping records. And his observation was that he was atypical of a lot of artists of that period, that prior to having the means to hire assistants, he was already keeping files, ring binders, and that kind of thing. Was it your impression too?

Saff: Yes. It was consistent with his general persona of shaping his reputation. And I guess looking forward to ensuring the fact that the documentation for that reputation was solid and accessible. So yes, he kept things, and he made sure that the preliminary work that would ultimately become the work of a registrar was already present. That really is quite different than anybody else that I'm aware of. He had comprehensive records and notes and paperwork and reviews and so forth. It seemed logical in terms of the way he did everything. Everything was career—not in a negative sense—career-oriented. He had a sense of what his position was and what people would want in the future. He looked forward in that way.

Q: So did he ever speak about it in a direct way to you?

Saff: No.

Q: You just observed this.

Saff: No. That's not the kind of thing he would say though. All of that was all the enigma of Bob. He didn't share his methodology. It's like when people wanted to talk to him about the techniques of a work, especially since he was so innovative. He wouldn't talk about technique, if he could avoid it. His feeling was if you talk about the techniques then you're missing the point of the content. So he refused to talk about techniques. He would say, "I'm not interested in that." I can't imagine that he would be interested in the techniques of his own persona, his methodology for advancing his work, or his philosophy. And so, no, that would be something he wouldn't talk about because it would distract from the end product. From the art.

Q: Or the form, or the idea.

Saff: Right.

Q: Architects don't talk about the construction processes that are used to raise their buildings most of the time—maybe unless you're Frank [O.] Gehry, or interested in aviation alloys or something. But even, I think, a lot of people—novices—people who are learning about art, the

first thing they're curious about is technique, and a lot of artists just see the technique as a means to an end.

Saff: That's true, but a lot of artists will talk about it. He will not talk about it. He refused to talk about it and would explain why. He wanted the participation in a different way. He always had a dialogue. It was always a dialogue with him—through the art or verbally. It was always basically about the content, in a way, as opposed to the formalist issues.

Q: Well, let's do some housekeeping on yesterday's conversation. We spoke about influences but we never got around to his friendship with Marcel Duchamp. Did he ever speak about that?

Saff: Not to me much. He would talk about [Alexina] Teeny Duchamp, who he had great affection for. But no, not to me. He did not speak about Marcel Duchamp to me.

Q: What did he have to say about Teeny?

Saff: It was just on a personal level. Just great affection for her but nothing substantive.

Q: No anecdotes or stories of any—

Saff: No. No, not to me.

Q: The economics of Robert Rauschenberg's enterprise. He has this entourage, he's got these pets, he's got these properties, these flowering plants, he's got this great kitchen, he's got this whole kind of scene that he inhabited. But a lot of these people who were working for him, with him, were also deriving income from that. How did that happen? What was the stratification of friends, collaborators, assistants? You said yesterday that everybody he worked with was a friend on some level. But what were the economics of the—

Saff: I'm not sure what you mean or what the nature of the question is.

Q: Well, how did everybody get paid? How was everybody compensated? What kind of standards were wages calculated?

Saff: They were underpaid. They were underpaid.

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: There's always the flip side to the story with Rauschenberg. People were paid by the hour. They were underpaid. On the other hand, at the end of the year or so, out of nowhere, he would present them with a painting, which more than compensated—

Q: Of course.

Saff: —for everything. So you'd have employees complaining about their income, while their collection—it wasn't growing in leaps and bounds, except for the person immediately around him, like Petersen or Darryl [R. Pottorf] or some of the other close friends. They received a huge number of works of art. Even David, I think, annually had an opportunity to get a work. And so, he would give. He would give works. He would give a lot of work away. He was very generous that way. Early on he would dedicate the works, and then eventually realized that that would have, perhaps, a negative effect on the marketability of certain works. And he stopped dedicating them, for the most part, so that it would be a more flexible currency in the future for those who received works.

If you traveled with him, as I said earlier—you're with him. You just went first class. I remember going to an opening with him. We left 381. He always traveled by stretch limousine. I was going up to the exhibit and I had a number of people in my limo—he arranged for two stretch limousines. I didn't have to go up in a stretch limousine. I remember in one instance, leaving 381, and I was in a stretch and he was in a stretch, and they came alongside of one another. He's waving to me to roll down the window. And he said, "Could you pass the Grey Poupon, please?"

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: And of course that ad was out there. That was such a clever thing to say at that time. It was so funny. So, no, there were no jokes—as you asked me last time—but there were these very incisive one-liners.

And then even coming back downtown, I remember that day. We were coming down together and he was very quiet, looking out as we drove down Second Avenue. And he looked out—he was looking at the people—and he said, "New York is a film without dialogue." And I just looked. It was quiet inside the car and all of these people were moving around. It just gave another dimension to what I was seeing. Those are the kinds of insights that you always had with him. It was always a different parallax that you would get from being with him, in terms of what you were seeing.

Q: It's a great quote. It's a great quote.

So just to return to the operations, were people just—was there a payroll, an accountant, a bursar, or were checks just written personally? Were taxes withheld? Was there a 401(k) plan for his studio assistants? I mean, I'm posing ridiculous questions.

[Laughter]

Q: Some artists do this.

Saff: How do I know?

Q: Oh, I don't know.

Saff: He had various accountants. Rubin [L.] Gorewitz was his long-term accountant. I guess payroll was handled probably from—Bob ran a tight ship in terms of wanting everything done correctly. He didn't try and circumvent anything. He wanted people paid properly. He wanted records kept properly. He ran into some problems with the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. I remember that, at one point, he needed money and that was the one time he had to ask people for some help for some funds. But the people were paid as independent contractors or they were on an hourly payroll. And he had Bradley who would keep track of things and write the checks. She also was involved with Change and running that for him after Rubin Gorewitz, who began to get into problems and Bob wanted to get away from him. I think it was at the point where Rubin was involved—he passed a remark about Leona Helmsley and he was quoted in the newspaper as saying how he would have gotten her off the hook, in terms of the IRS. Here it is quoted in the *New York Times* about how you would circumvent the laws and the IRS. That was it for Bob. He had it. He didn't want any association with that kind of thing.

So he was very much aware, again, of reputation. He moved on to the accountant Bennet [H.] Grutman, who was squeaky clean and was very good in terms of sorting out his affairs. He brought in Bennet who then paid off people who were owed money. For example, I was owed a lot of money. I traveled everywhere for Bob and at a certain point, I stopped getting paid. A year later, I'm still working. I never had enough nerve to say to Bob, "How come I'm not getting paid anymore?" I was getting a small income from the university because I had taken some leave. He eventually brought in Bennet, who he then asked to find out all of these things that were not looked after by Rubin. And Bob paid off everything and cleaned up any debts or obligations that he had. He's very good that way. The people that worked for him, I guess they might have been

underpaid but were over-compensated. In the end, I don't know anybody who left him because they weren't paid enough, that's for sure.

Q: Or because he was a bully or a—

Saff: No, because he was—no, they didn't leave him—

Q: —drama queen sometimes.

Saff: No. Nope.

Q: They were very loyal to him because—

Saff: Absolutely.

Q: —at the end of the day, they knew that he cared about all of them.

Saff: Absolutely. And he did. No matter what he said. However catty he might be about some of them. Lawrence [Voytek] would walk out and he'd pass some remark or whatever and it didn't mean anything because he didn't hold on to these grudges, as I said previously. They didn't stay with him. He didn't have vendettas.

Q: But you suggested yesterday that Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, and others wearied of the kinds of interactions they were having with him, and just stepped away from their friendships with him.

Saff: Right. He'd wear you down. He'd just wear you down. Enough was enough. If you didn't need him, then you'd probably want to insulate yourself and walk away because he was an umbrella that shaded everybody else from their entitled sunshine. The spotlight couldn't get through to you while Bob Rauschenberg was around, that's for sure. So at some point, you'd just walk away from it. I guess that's what these people did. And there are other professionals and people who didn't necessarily want to be with him. They didn't get the laughter that you were obliged to go along with. He had this manner of hysterical laughter that seemed somewhat phony, and when you were there you laughed along with him. You were sort of obliged to. That didn't go too well with Roy. He didn't want to be in that situation. So if Roy had to go over there for dinner because they were in Captiva—Dorothy [Lichtenstein] loved him. Roy, he didn't want to go there and talk about Bob.

Q: So how was his relationship with other artists? You've spoken about—

Saff: There were not many—

Q: —Twombly and Johns—

Saff: —relationships with others. There were some people around, some younger people—Al Taylor and some young budding artists. They were people who were not a threat. They were artists who were coming up, but were not a threat. I don't know of his liaison with other artists. Other than talking positively about Merce, John, and Trisha, because he spent time with them and produced great collaborative works. But it wasn't an ongoing relationship. He just didn't have that. There wasn't any room for that.

Q: How about Anselm Kiefer? Did he have any contact?

Saff: Yes. But I don't think he had any interest in any of that. He was all about Bob. Bob was about Bob.

Q: How about Warhol? They must have had some—

Saff: Well slowly, you know, Warhol. Yes, they did parties. But that wasn't Bob's scene. You see, Bob didn't do drugs and didn't enjoy the seedier aspect of things. So that was not his thing. Also, Warhol was bigger than life and that's not the context that Bob would want to be in. So no, there wasn't anything. There were always the photographs, the get-together for the occasional party. But not any friendship of any consequence. The friendships were basically with the people that he worked with. The friendships were Bill Goldston or me or [Sidney B.] Sid Felsen or the people who had worked down there. Everybody else served a purpose. I guess so did we.

Q: But other artists of his generation or even a little bit younger, people like Richard Serra, Nancy Graves—any contact with them?

Saff: Well, he really disliked Richard Serra. He found him much too volatile—was petrified that Serra was going to throw us off a balcony in Washington because he was so volatile.

Q: Well, tell that story. That sounds like a key—

Saff: We were in a room at the Marriott in D.C. for one of the openings. Richard Serra was there. I forget what we were attending. But Serra, he seemed so volatile to Bob, so aggressive. So kind of masculine and pushy. And there were a few words. Bob was really fearful that Serra would do something really traumatic to him, including, he said, "I was afraid that he was going to push us off the balcony." Well, if you know Richard Serra, you know it's—

Q: It was not Carl Andre, it was Richard Serra.

Saff: No, it was Richard Serra, right. So, I don't think he had great affection. I don't think he particularly cared for—what was the piece in—

Q: The *Tilted Arc* [1981]?

Saff: *Tilted Arc*, right. That it forced people to walk around it and all of that. I don't think he was a great fan. But again, I can't think of a situation where I actually heard him, with specificity,

talking about given works, which he'd liked or disliked. He wouldn't say that Serra's work is not any good or that—

Q: That's what you said yesterday. He was very careful of that.

Saff: He was very circumspect about that kind of thing. There was not a public judgment he would make. And maybe it's because he didn't make the judgments. Not because he was politic. Maybe he just didn't make the judgment.

Q: But he had artists like Rosenquist with whom he was friends.

Saff: Yes, Rosenquist he was friendly with—to whatever degree he was capable of being friendly. He had a genuine affection for Rosenquist. I can't say that about anybody else.

Q: Very interesting. How about other critics, historians, writers? I know he was a friend of [Robert S. F.] Bob Hughes.

Saff: He liked Bob Hughes.

Q: They liked the same recreational use of alcohol.

Saff: Yes and he would actually read some of Bob Hughes. Because, obviously, few people could turn a phrase like Bob Hughes could. And I think that Hughes's taste—his antipathy for

Warhol—had resonance with Rauschenberg, even though it wasn't explicit. So, in a sense, Hughes could be an extension of Rauschenberg's thinking without Rauschenberg having to go on record as saying the things he said.

And so when it came, we'll say, to ROCI, he wanted Hughes to write the piece for ROCI in the United States. I went to Hughes and he thought about it and then eventually said he couldn't do it. I guess he just thought it was maybe a conflict of interest. He never said specifically why he wouldn't do it but he wouldn't do it. Yes, he really liked Hughes.

Q: Did Rauschenberg ever read Hughes's "SoHoiad [Or, the Masque of Art: A Satire in Heroic Couplets Drawn from Life]" in the *New York Review Books* [1984]? The sort of Alexander Pope inspired send-up of [Julian] Schnabel and the Neo-Expressionists?

Saff: He was aware of Hughes's statement on Schnabel and that truly resonated with him.

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: And so, yes, he was aware of that. It might have taken people to read it for him, like, "Hey, Bob, look at this"—because, you know, you'd look for things to segue into conversation with Bob. For the most part, I would bring things because—I was so anxious about it, I would prepare myself with all kinds of conversation pieces, in case anything went downhill and it got extra quiet and I didn't know what to say. So I'd have material to read to him. And I read to him Bob

Hughes on Schnabel and others. You'd get this nod and this smile. But not jumping on the bandwagon. Just, you knew he agreed.

Q: Did he have a lot of interaction with Barbara Rose? I know she wrote early on about it.

Saff: Barbara Rose, yes.

Q: Interesting character.

Saff: Yes. He liked her. He wasn't a Frank Stella fan.

Q: Neither is she, by the way, on some level.

Saff: Well, yes. I guess he liked her and certainly was available to do interviews with her. Eventually, like most people, she wanted something from him. She wanted him to finance a publication. So, like many of his friends, what was an art acquaintance became a kind of financial deal where they were asking for help. And, more often than not, could get it. But Barbara Rose didn't get the money.

Q: So, blurring the lines between studio genres extended to the lines between a business relationship and a friendship also being somewhat indistinct.

Saff: Everything was fuzzy. There were no hard edges with Bob. As I said last time, he loved to help but he loved to help when it came from him—not when you asked for it.

Q: His idea.

Saff: Right.

Q: He heard that you needed something and he could save you.

Saff: Right.

Q: Calvin Tomkins.

Saff: No. [Pauses] I don't know. I don't think he liked *Off the Wall*[*: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, 1980] particularly. Again, nothing negative but nothing positive. He didn't necessarily look forward to the visits, but would never say anything negative about Calvin.

Q: Well, the reason why I asked earlier about Barbara Rose was, like Bob Hughes, she's a person who has many opinions, which she can express in extremely colorful ways. And that was sort of the segue to her. I wondered if Rauschenberg appreciated that aspect of her.

Saff: Absolutely. There was a turn of phrase and a gusto and all of that had appeal. It's just like—

Q: And a piquant wit, dare I say.

Saff: Right. It's just like with [Thomas] Tom Krens. Bob saw him as the museum equivalent of the *enfant terrible* in the museum world as he was in the art world, once upon a time. He had great affinity for Tom and what he was trying to do—how he was pushing the definition of museums and the globalization of that activity, which was of great fondness for Bob. Anything that globalized activity, anything that moved across or away from the limitations of country or particularized interest, was something that Bob wanted to advance. So, with Krens, you had a natural extension of what Bob was doing but in the museum world.

Q: But he was not friendly with many literary types—poets and stuff—or was he?

Saff: Well you would think so [laughs]. It's all very—

Q: Like Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara and so forth.

Saff: Yes, but you have him being very close with, say, [Yevgeny] Yevtushenko. As I went around for ROCI, he was very interested in who I met with. I was dealing with Octavio Paz from Mexico, or José Donoso in Chile, or I went to see [Jorge Luis] Borges in Argentina. All in an effort to have these people write for ROCI. See, he wanted them to write about his work for ROCI. So he was very keen on these authors. I don't know how he knew about them or why he was so driven by going to just the right literary person because he generally didn't have a liaison

with them. Remember, he didn't read. He did relate to the Russians. Yevtushenko and [Andrei] Voznesensky. These people, he had—I think—a great affection for. So when he could, he'd spend some time with them. But it wasn't on an ongoing relationship.

Q: Well, let's just step away from this laundry list of acquaintances and colleagues that I wanted to try to get on the map in this conversation. Let's talk about ROCI. Let's just go to year one of ROCI. What was the genesis of the concept? In places I've read it was you who had the idea.

Saff: No. No.

Q: No.

Saff: No. No, absolutely not. As I told you yesterday, I was in China early on. Around 1977, Gemini wanted to organize a paper project in China. So they went to, I think, Fred Lazarus [IV], the president of Maryland Institute College of Art [Baltimore]. And through Maryland art institute, they made a connection with a woman by the name Chun-Wuei Su Chien. Her husband was a physicist at [Johns] Hopkins [University, Baltimore], who was associated with the University of Nanjing [China]. So they had really solid connections. And the object was to work at the Xuan paper mill, the world's oldest paper mill, in Jingxian, China. So Bob wanted me to go on the trip because I had co-authored a book on printmaking and I knew about paper making, and he didn't know what he was going to do. So he would bring me along as the technical person. I took all kinds of material—he asked me to bring all kinds of material, which I did. We

went over there and traveled. I collected posters, which I had been collecting from my earlier China visit. I thought that that would be helpful to him, so we bought tons of posters on this trip. Then on the way to Jingxian, which is rather isolated, we went through the Yellow Mountains, and there, we waited. Because they had decided that they didn't want us to go to the world's oldest paper mill because we might steal their secrets. So they kept us in the Yellow Mountains. And I remember one day, while we were waiting—it was in the morning. We walked out on a balcony, we looked out at the mountains, and it was just like a Song Dynasty painting. You had these mountains that were going straight up with fog in between. It was right out of a scroll painting. And I'm looking at this scene and Bob's looking at it, and he says, "Disappointed again. All they were doing was painting what they were seeing."

Donald Saff and Rauschenberg in the Yellow Mountains, Anhui, China, 1982. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: Once again, he's absolutely right. I was looking at it—but to make that connection and to do it partly with humor. Again, not the "walk into a bar" joke. It was always this little twist of how he saw things.

Eventually, we got to Jingxian and they never did let us go to the paper mill. They claimed that the workers were in the paper vats nude and mixing pulp—they would stand in the paper vats nude. And, of course, Bob, given his proclivity, was very anxious to see this and claimed that he would not be offended by any of that. But that didn't work for them. So we worked in a so-called VIP compound. And at this VIP compound—he was such a sweetie pie on so many levels that people who would not normally work, especially the Chinese at that time—wouldn't work a minute past the time they had to—started staying there. Because they didn't understand—they didn't understand the work ethic, actually, of this guy who would get up in the morning and work—just never stop and keep going. So they started staying there—the chef started staying there and eventually started to teach Bob how to make dumplings. Somehow, they all loved him.

Robert Rauschenberg
Individual (from 7 Characters), 1982
Silk, ribbon, paper, paper-pulp relief, ink, and gold leaf on handmade Xuan paper with mirror
43 x 31 x 2 1/2 inches (109.2 x 78.7 x 6.4 cm)
From an edition of 70 unique variations, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

Rauschenberg working on *7 Characters* at the so-called VIP compound, Jingxian, China, 1982. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Attributed to Ruth Saff

Well, in one of the conversations with the cook, through a translator, he was asking about his family and he said that he couldn't see his family because he needed permission to go twenty miles away and he didn't know what was happening there and he hadn't been there for years or decades. Bob started thinking at that point that if these people didn't know what was going on twenty miles away, they certainly didn't know what was going on two thousand miles away or

ten thousand miles away, whatever. There was an issue of communication and need for communication.

Before we left, Doug Chrismas was trying to convince Bob to do a world tour. Bob wanted to do something but it didn't have a purpose other than just being an exhibition. It didn't make any sense to him. This conversation—almost a singular conversation with this cook—somehow gave him the idea that what he needs to do is introduce the world to itself through his art. And the way you would do it is go to a country, take their imagery, make art, show it to them, and then show it to other countries. He would go to countries that had sensitive issues. He certainly wasn't interested in going to England or France or any of those places. He wanted to go to places that had political or social problems and needed him being there so perhaps the art would make a difference.

So when we got back to Beijing, the idea was crystallized. He had made up his mind that there was going to be this world tour, indeed. But that the world tour would be fashioned in a way that it would do some good and that maybe it would contribute, in some way, to world peace. Now, he wasn't naive about the notion of world peace. He didn't think it would happen because he did some sort of project. But he actually thought he could contribute in a significant way and positive way. And so by the time we left Beijing, he had conceived of the idea that he would give a work of art from each country to some museum in the U.S. and a work of art to the people of each of the countries he visited. The people—not the government—because the countries that he wanted to go to—Cuba, Soviet Union, and others—he certainly didn't want to give it to the government. He didn't want to be seen as anything other than a citizen of the world. He didn't

want it to be perceived as a vehicle for American imperialism and that he was a pawn in that activity. So he wanted to stay away from association with American embassies.

Rauschenberg and Saff (behind), China, 1982. Photo: Elyse Grinstein or Ruth Saff

Q: I have a question for you. Were either of you aware, at that time, of how Abstract Expressionism had been juiced by the USIA [United States Information Agency] as a Cold War propaganda tool?

Saff: Bob was, yes, and I was. We agreed that I would have no association with the USIA, and that we would have no association with any of the embassies and we would go it on our own, which caused great consternation for many people, including Marion Javits, who went nuts. Yes, he was aware of that, and he was very much aware of staying clear of that as best we could. Of course, I couldn't stay clear of it. If I wanted to meet Borges, the only way I knew how to do it was to go to the cultural attaché and ask for an introduction. I didn't know how else to do it. So basically without saying anything to Bob, I would meet with some of these people and they

would arrange for introductions. It never went beyond that. Yes, he was entertained in Chile by the ambassador but he really had no association with embassies or the government.

Q: But by 1981, ’82, ’83—’84, right, was the first year that—

Saff: ’86 I think. [Note: The first ROCI exhibition was at Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City, 1985.]

Q: Okay, ’86. By that time, all of the documents related to Abstract Expressionism and rock and roll and all this are being packaged into a free world message to be broadcast into the Iron Curtain or into China as a disruptive, or as—how should we put it—as a way of trying to promote freedom on a certain level.

You’re smiling.

Saff: Well because that’s exactly what he was doing.

Q: Right, but do you think the government actually, without his knowing it, was able to use ROCI for political capital?

Saff: I don’t think they had to. I think it intrinsically was political capital for them. You go into Chile with [Augusto] Pinochet there, and you have an exhibition. And you do the exhibition in the [Museo Nacional de] Bellas Artes [Santiago], in the museum—in their museum—and you do

Rauschenberg work, which basically is license to do anything. The one thing about Bob is he gave license to use any material, to go in any direction, to use any subject. If anything would be an invective against some sort of totalitarian situation, it would be his kind of art. It was insidious. I think the only thing that compromised it was the fact that it was still a product of an American artist. With conversations that took place after openings, there was always a group of students who were suspect. And who had to get over the fact that he was American before they could really engage in the work as being something that was basically, in a sense, an advocacy of the kinds of freedoms that they wanted as exercised through the universal language of art.
So I think it worked for them. I knew that the ambassadors were happy that the shows were coming and really wanted it to happen. The ambassador of Argentina certainly wanted it. The Argentines were the only ones that didn't want the show. Eventually, by the time they thought that maybe it's a good idea, Bob turned it down.

Q: So a government like the Pinochet regime in Chile might have opposed it. You'd almost expect them to not want to host this kind of an exhibition. But by allowing it, it let them seem more tolerant or more open in some way?

Saff: I think that they didn't necessarily comprehend the effectiveness of the communication that would take place through the art. I don't think they thought that through. I think that museum directors were anxious to have the show. The shows were coming fully paid for. It was easy for them to get the exhibition—a name brand artist—and the implications I don't think were so obvious. The implications on this end for going to a place like Chile was significant. A lot of artists, a lot of people were pissed off at Bob—and me—for going to Chile and going to Cuba,

particularly Chile. When I interviewed Bob for the National Gallery catalogue [*Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange*, 1991], I think I might have said it. The one thing people began to say to me, especially the Spaniards, is that the worst thing that happened was isolating the Spanish people from the rest of the world when [Francisco] Franco was there. Franco did not suffer—the people suffered. And to do the same thing because of Pinochet would be a tactical mistake.

It took a lot of courage. And again, Bob didn't back down because the heat was on. I went to him and said, "The heat's on, Bob. People don't want us to go to Chile with Pinochet there. It's not right. What do you want to do?" He said, "We're going." He had options, because I went to all of these places. I went to Manaus and other cities in Brazil to look for a venue there. I went to Argentina, to Venezuela—where we did have the show—to Chile and elsewhere. I would go back to the U.S.A. and Bob would select the place based on all the information I gave him.

But to back up, by the time we left Beijing, the idea was pretty well crystallized in terms of what he was going to do. He was ready to go back and figure out how to finance it and all. Of course at the time, he didn't necessarily think of financing it himself. This was a huge undertaking. He was going to get money. So we went back and he went to [Frederick R.] Fred Weisman. Fred Weisman was a difficult guy. A big collector, a lot of money. I guess he was a big distributor for Toyota. And Bob cut a deal with Fred Weisman saying, "You can pick any work you want, before anybody else, from each of the countries I go to, if you help finance the exhibition." Fred agreed. And he came down on a few occasions to Captiva. I would meet him and he would pick works, and he would pick just extraordinary works. Well, Bob didn't like him. Bob didn't like

Fred Weisman. And I remember Fred flying in—he flew in and I had to go meet him—and Bob would say, "I want to talk to you some more, Don. Why don't you stay here a little longer." He wanted me to be late. And so he delayed me like a good hour, hour and a half—just, "Screw you, Fred Weisman. You're going to wait." When I arrived there, Fred Weisman was so angry. He was just furious. Came in, picked out some glorious work. Once, he was flying back, and he said, "Oh, I'll drop you off on the way back." So I got on his jet and during the flight Fred said, "Listen, this is what I want you to do. As you set up these exhibitions, I would like you to set up an exhibition of my collection to follow the Rauschenberg exhibition." I said, "Okay." I got off the plane, I called Bob, told him what he had said. And Bob had his guy call Fred and say, "I'm not doing the deal with you." So he never took the money and he stopped the arrangement. Bob was not going to be exploited.

Then it was a matter of, "Okay, well, we'll get money from United Technologies or the cigarette company, Philip Morris." So we spoke to people from these companies, and then it was like, no, we don't want cigarette money. And United Technologies makes bad things in terms of weapons. So maybe it's a bad idea to be associated with them. In the end, they didn't give us money anyhow—everybody turned us down. Since everybody turned us down, it was in Bob's interest to say, "I don't want anybody's money because that would corrupt the whole project." And so, he wouldn't allow the project to be corrupted by outside money, although, god knows we tried to get it.

Eventually, what was a way of turning the facts around actually became the way he really wanted it to happen. Because eventually Bob realized that it was the only way to do this with

some integrity, and that ROCI had a lot of integrity. He didn't sell work from that project. He devoted years—time. And he wasn't selling work, and he wasn't trying to sell any of the ROCI work. Eventually, he had me work with Jack Cowart at the National Gallery. And, of course, at the time, the National Gallery had a rule that they could not have an exhibition of a living artist. And so how do we arrange a show at the National? We talked about having a show at the Met or at the Modern. But nothing made sense other than the National Gallery because that's the way he was doing it all around. And because his idea was that you would have the ambassadors or attachés, or whomever a given government was using in Washington, come to an opening, which Bob would sponsor, and he presented a work from that country to the National Gallery. And by having that event take place, he would get people together in a social setting that they would not normally be in, and therefore, he'd make some inroads into easing relationships.

He did have this in mind. Again, not like, "I'm going to create peace in our time." But he did intend to have these people together and, as he went to each country, to bring all these people back each time, so that these ambassadors and politicians and government agents would be together in a social setting. And he gave a major work, and he selected the best to give to the National Gallery. At the same time, simultaneously, giving a work of art to the people of the country that he had visited. Of course, how he gave it to them also was a thorn in their side. For example, in Mexico, he wanted to give it to Tamayo's—

Robert Rauschenberg
Forecaster / ROCI MEXICO, 1985
Acrylic on canvas
80 3/4 x 50 3/8 inches (205.1 x 128 cm)
Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo,
Mexico City

Q: The museum? The [Museo] Rufino Tamayo [Mexico City]?

Saff: No. He gave it to the people through Tamayo's—

Q: —widow?

Saff: Paramour. Not the widow, no. Her name was Lola. It was an in-your-face kind of thing so that the museum director at the Rufino Tamayo, who—I forget his name for a moment [Robert Littman]. He used to be director of the museum at NYU [Grey Art Gallery, New York University]—came to me and said, "The government is outraged. You're giving it to basically a prostitute for the people." She was, however, much beloved by the people. The director said it should be going to the government. Well, Bob wouldn't give it to the government—just wouldn't do it. So there was this big standoff. He wants to give the work, they want the work given to the

minister of culture. Bob didn't give in. He did not give in. It was very awkward. And, of course, I was caught in between all these things.

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: He sure made it entertaining. And so the work went to the people through that conduit, and basically that's what happened in each of the countries. He tried not to work with the government of that country and he didn't work with our government. And he wanted this to be a people-to-people activity.

Q: So where, ultimately, did the piece he gave to Tamayo's—

Saff: It went to the Tamayo Museum. [Note: *Forecaster / ROCI MEXICO*, 1985, was given to Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City.]

Q: The mistress ultimately—

Saff: Yes, then it went to the museum, yes.

Q: —it ended up at the museum.

Saff: Yes.

Q: But he didn't want it to come to the museum—

Saff: Through the government.

Q: —through the widow, through the government, through the girlfriend.

Saff: Right.

[Laughter]

Q: Very funny.

Saff: Yes, if he could turn the knife, he would. To make a point he would do it. It was interesting. When we went back to China, when we went to China to do this project, we—

Q: The paper mill project.

Saff: The paper mill project. We stopped off in Beijing and they asked us to do a lecture—both of us—to do a lecture at the [Central] Academy of [Fine] Arts in Beijing, the art school. And we traveled with slides and so forth, knowing that we were going to have to do something like that. So I said, "Well what am I supposed to do, Bob? You're going to be there." He said, "Why don't you just show photographs. You just show my photographs." And I said, "The point being?" He said, "The point being is that a photograph is going to be very accessible for them. A

photograph's a photograph—it's going to be easy. And they're going to see through the photographs that you don't have to make anything up. It's all there in the photograph." So you show a photograph of, say, the rippled side of the panel truck that is reflected in a side view mirror of that truck, and that combination of big abstraction and a specific thing in a strange juxtaposition. He said, "That would make it easy for me to show them the painting and the sculpture."

And that's the way it went. I gave a lecture on his photography. And he, then, showed paintings. They did ask a lot about Duchamp, which he deflected. They were very informed, which, I don't know why it came as a surprise—because you thought they didn't have access to material. But they had a lot of questions. And mostly about Duchamp were the questions.

Q: Interesting.

Saff: And again, Bob deflected it and came back to his own work. The thing about that was that it was consistent with him saying again and again, you don't have to invent anything. It's all there. If people would just look—Bob would relate something and they'd say, "Really? Are you just making that up?" He would say, "I don't have to make anything up. You never have to make anything up. It's all out there. I don't have to make anything up." That was true of the work, too. It's true of the stories, was true of the work. He saw everything, and he saw the most peculiar things. It was all out there for him just to see.

Q: Why don't we talk about the ROCI tour itself. Who was on the ROCI team? You, obviously, and Bob, and then people like Thomas Buehler, and there was a woman named Brenda Woodward.

Saff: Brenda was my long-term assistant at University of South Florida. An absolute whiz as a—you're not supposed to say secretary, but she was that to begin with. And then she was my assistant—sometimes traveled with me. Thomas Buehler was in charge of shipping the work around. That, fundamentally, was the working team. I don't know what role David had, if any, at the time.

Basically, the methodology was for me to travel to these sensitive areas and come back to Bob and make suggestions. So that, for example, you go to Peru—and I was in Lima and the Shining Path was really active—and it became clear to me that Bob would be in jeopardy, as would the show, especially at that time—that that would be a good opportunity for them to create problems. So I would go back and say to Bob, "This is a problem. It's a great place for you to have a show, but bad idea."

The records were kept by Brenda and Thomas facilitated the shipping. First we worked with [DB] Schenker, and then I think—I don't know whether Masterpiece [International] was Masterpiece at the time. But [David] Dave Epstein from Masterpiece was the guy who was key in terms of the shipping.

Shipping sometimes became a real problem. It was, particularly, in the case of Cuba, where one of Bob's staff members who was helping Thomas put in one of the packages some insurance form, which indicated that the work was going to Cuba. Once that was picked up in Miami, somebody saw that, the word was out, and nobody would handle the shipping to Cuba. We couldn't get it out of Miami. We couldn't ship it out of Texas. Nobody would take it. It was just a total embargo on the work. And so, Bob was prepared to send the work to Sweden—this major show, which was half a 747 cargo plane, to Sweden to send back to Cuba—which is, what, ninety miles away—in order to get the work in. And I remember calling Dave Epstein and saying, "What's the deal?" He says, "Nobody will touch it. The unions have stopped it. The faction in Miami's too strong for us to go against." He said to me, "Maybe there's another show that Bob is sending around somewhere." So, in sort of code, he was saying what he was saying. So I hung up and I called him back. I said, "Dave, Rauschenberg is having a show. Could you send it to Mexico?" So we sent the show to Mexico. Thomas Buehler met the plane in Mexico. Switched the cargo in Mexico City to another plane and then flew it into Cuba.

Robert Rauschenberg
Cuban Acre / ROCI CUBA, 1985
Enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel
84 3/4 x 216 3/4 inches (215.3 x 550.5 cm)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

There were a lot of problems that way. The staff wasn't that large but Thomas Buehler was truly amazing. We went from one place to another with all their specific issues and problems. Cuba had no white paint at all. I asked Bob to fly some down. He'd had a private plane fly him to Cuba. And he brought white paint with him so we would paint the museum. We painted one room white. The next day all the paint was gone. You could hold onto gold more effectively than you could white paint in Cuba. They just didn't have any access to it. And the minute it was there, it was stolen the next day.

There, Roberto [Fernández] Retamar was the poet who was involved. Again, it was always the poets that were the key people in making things happen.

Q: So, it's Octavio Paz—

Saff: In Mexico.

Q: In Mexico. Argentina you had Borges, although the show—

Saff: Did not go there.

Saff: And José Donoso in Chile. I forget who we used in Venezuela. I think Yevtushenko in Soviet Union at the time. The rest escapes me. We met [Gabriel García] Márquez in Cuba. He was active with his film school there [Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV, San Antonio de los

Baños] and met him, but we wanted Retamar to write because he made it possible for me to get in there.

Actually, the way I got into Cuba was through my brother, who's a world-class mathematician. He went to the minister of culture who then put him on Roberto Retamar, who was the head of the Casa de las Américas [Havana]. And he arranged for me to be able to come initially and check out where the show could go and set it up.

Q: So did you go to the Cuban venues from Mexico?

Saff: No. I flew directly. Eastern Air Lines, at midnight, would become ABC Airlines. And at midnight, you could get on an Eastern Air Lines flight, and they would put you in Havana. The engines were never turned off. You got off the plane and they took off again. It was Eastern Air Lines staff, an Eastern Air Lines pilot—he's sitting on the plane—and they had some sort of arrangement where they could go in under ABC Airlines at that time. So I just flew in directly. You were supposed to have a treasury license in order to go there, and I didn't have that. That's when I started getting calls from Marion Javits who was just beside herself, especially since I was flying from Cuba to the Soviet Union. She wanted to know why we weren't going through the State Department, and I said that we weren't working with the government. She said, over the phone, "You and Bob are a bunch of fucking communists!" and slammed the phone down. You know, that's Marion Javits.

We tried to avoid that. It was a problem. It was a big problem for me because at a certain point I could not return to this country without being interviewed both by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. And it was absurd because the information they could get from me they could more readily get from *Time* magazine. But they did have a lot of questions about who I met with and what I thought each person did—especially in the Soviet Union at the Artists Union [Union of Artists of the USSR], by name. They knew the people by name and they wanted to know what each person did. I was obliged to meet with these people as I got back and it became standard routine. I don't think they ever bothered Bob but they did hound me a lot.

Q: What were they hoping to find, or hoping that you would reveal?

Saff: I don't know. They would ask questions. They'd give me a name and say, "What does that person do." I'd say, "That person's in charge—as far as I know—of the publicity." Or, "That person? I don't know what that person did. He just sat in on the meetings." It was very, very strange. There was a difference. The FBI guy became sort of a friend, supposedly. He would take me to lunch and all of that. She, from the CIA, was not so pleasant and very businesslike. I remember having to cancel a meeting with her, and she was out of Orlando, and I called Orlando and they said, "There's no office here." So, I called [CIA Headquarters in] Langley [Virginia]—they never admitted that there was such a person. I said, "Well, I have to cancel a meeting with her and she doesn't exist, whatever. I'm canceling a meeting." And then a half hour later I get a call from her saying, "I understand you have to cancel a meeting." So I never contacted them.

They watched what I was doing and contacted me after our return from any number of these countries, especially Soviet Union, Cuba, and China.

Q: Can you share any specific stories about the ROCI tour? You did share the story about Tamayo's girlfriend. But there was another incident you alluded to about someone being locked out of their hotel room in the middle of the night. Anyway, just any anecdotes like that.

Saff: I think the plan was that Bob would go there and work with the artists in each country. That's the way it was promoted. It didn't happen that way. The way it worked was that Bob would go and travel and get material, and he'd find everything—from feed bags, to tin cans, to whatever—and bring all this material back with him or have it shipped back. He would then go to his studio and make these works and return to the country with their imagery. That was the game plan. "We'll use your images, things that you're familiar with, and show you how it can be used in ways that you never conceived of using it." And that was the way he worked. The show was an additive process. To begin with, he had to use works from different countries that he had visited before the ROCI idea was conceived. Bob would travel to each country but basically, I was not there when Bob was there. I didn't want to travel with Bob.

Q: Why not?

Saff: [Pause] On occasion, I didn't particularly like being around him. It's too anxiety-ridden for me. I never knew what he was going to do next. When he received the [National] Medal of Arts and [President William J. "Bill"] Clinton gave it to him—David and I went to the White House

and we're in the garden and both of us were sitting next to one another, anxiety-ridden, because we didn't know what the hell he was going to do. I knew that he was going to put his hand on Hillary [Rodham Clinton]'s ass—I knew something like that was going to happen. Or he was going to say something to Bill in the middle of this thing. And David and I were saying to each other, "Can he just behave himself during this? Can he behave himself?" And he is given the medal and he starts whispering something in Bill's ear—Bill Clinton, that is. And we thought, "Oh, here we go. What the hell is he saying?" And Clinton smiled and that was that.

Rauschenberg receiving the National Medal of Arts Award, presented by President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton, White House Lawn, Washington, D.C., October 1993. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: What I'm talking about is what it was like for me to be around him. Some people didn't necessarily react that way. I think I was always overly sensitive to the people who were around him who were affected by him and sometimes in a horrible way—particularly the people who were employed by him. And then other people who might be affected by him in a rather innocent way.

In Cuba, for example, they wanted to honor him and they put on a dance performance for him—a local dance company, small stage. They were dancing. Bob got up on the stage, shit-faced drunk, and started dancing and interrupting their dancing. And eventually fell off the stage—fell off the stage. I thought he was going to kill himself. I walked out at that point. Let his other people take care of him. He would never allow that to happen to his work. For him to interfere with somebody else's art is just something that he would never accept for himself. On the other hand, he had no hesitation to get up there and to interrupt what they were doing. There was no feeling for that at all. I sat there cringing because it was such an embarrassment. Of course, everybody had a smile on their face—nobody got insulted. Nobody was insulted by him. They didn't dare be insulted by him.

There were those situations. Then there were the situations where he would talk to students and give his time and work with them and look at their work and be supportive and say all the right things to energize people—to give them some leg up on what he was doing with his own work and what they were doing with their work. It's always this combination.

Q: The dichotomy.

Saff: Yes. And for me, I couldn't work under those circumstances. Basically, I didn't have to be with him, as I was doing advance work, so I was always somewhere else. I would try and double-back for the opening, as I did in Cuba, unfortunately. Although it was nice to be with him and spend time with him with [Fidel] Castro, and see him—

Q: Tell us about that. David told me that he was invited—that you all were asked to come and spend a few days with Castro.

Saff: David wasn't there that night when we went—

Q: No, he wasn't. He had to go back but he said he was there briefly.

Saff: Yes. What happened was—Castro eventually invited Bob to go to one of his villas on the water or whatever, which I don't think that Bob did. But then we were invited to whatever it is—the palace?—his home in Havana. It was Bob's sister and me and Castro, and Bob, of course. So we went there, and there was Fidel, bigger than life. This big tall guy, smile on his face. Put his hand on your shoulder—extremely engaging. And Bob? He was charming.

And the conversation developed. Of course, Castro could speak English but wouldn't speak English. He had an interpreter who would stand by us and could interpret simultaneously with what Castro was saying. So, either she was unbelievably great, or this was canned stuff that she was used to. The conversation just ranged. He talked about—what did he talk about? He talked about cooking shark. And that the Chinese had nobility, and they had people that could do that for them, and it took a long time to cook shark, and they needed a caste system to do that. And he said it without any judgment. He just talked about the caste system. He talked about Gregor Mendel—

Q: Genes, huh? [Laughs]

Saff: Yes, talked about being bald and inherited traits. He turns to me says, "Why do you have a beard?" I said, "Well, I've got a fat face. It looks better." I said, "Why do you have a beard?" He said, "I don't want a beard." He said, "I have to keep it because of the revolution. It's a symbol." He talked about being bored by the East Germans. How boring it was to go over there—fly all night—and to sit in, listen to their politics, and then he would fall asleep. It's like—this guy's wonderful. What's the problem?

Q: [Laughs]

Saff: And Bob said to him—because he then invited Bob—Bob says, "Well, I want you to come to Captiva." And Castro says, "You want me to come to Captiva? You're the first person in twenty some-odd years that's ever invited me to the United States." But Bob said, "You should absolutely come. You should come." And Fidel says, "What will I do there? Look at the garbage in the Gulf of Mexico that you throw out there?" So things started turning. So Fidel says, "I'll cook a meal for you if I go there." And Bob says, "Good, you can cook breakfast." Fidel says, "Fine." And Bob says, "Good, because I don't eat breakfast."

[Laughter]

Saff: This was Rauschenberg being Rauschenberg. Nobody upstages him. I don't give a shit who you are. He's going to have the last word. And he snookered Castro. He absolutely snookered him into a position where Bob had the last word.

At that point, Castro turns to me and says, "Do you know that the United States drops an atomic bomb twice a week in South America?" I said, "I beg your pardon?" I said, "I don't know what you mean." He said, "What I mean is that if the U.S. were to help with humanitarian aid, the lives that they would save would be the equivalent of those people who would be killed." He said, "So it's the equivalent of that." And then that started a harangue about the *New York Times* wanting to come in, and he wouldn't allow it until such time as we provide him with more humanitarian aid. And on and on and on. Then, it was like an hour and a half of getting a lecture from this guy. At that point, Bob just sort of turned away from him—was just uninterested. You could see it on Bob's face and certainly that was easily conveyed to Castro.

Even with Malaysia, they told Bob—because Bob was always hands-on touchy with people—they told him, "Do not touch the king. You can't touch the king. You can't touch the king." Now, I'm not there for the opening. I didn't go back for this one. So the king comes up to him. Bob puts his arm around the king! The security guys went up to Bob afterward and said, "You do it one more time and we'll shoot you." This is at a celebration for the opening of the exhibition. Bob was warned not to touch the guy—that you don't do that. And of course, he, being warned, did just the opposite. He'd break every so-called rule he could break. He did it sexually, he did it personally, he did it artistically.

Q: What was the story you were telling us yesterday about him being locked out of his hotel room?

Saff: Well, you know, Bob's crew disliked him in the Soviet Union.

Q: Why? Why was that?

Saff: I guess he was being difficult with the people who were installing the work—Thomas and Darryl and Terry Van Brunt, whoever was there. And he was being difficult. So one night he calls me. He said, "You're the only friend I have." It's like 3:00 in the morning. "You're the only friend I have. Can you come up and talk with me?" I went up there and I spoke with him for a few hours. The guy could be terribly lonely. If he got enough people angry, nobody wanted to go near him.

Well, he would get pretty drunk on some of these occasions. I have worse stories in Sweden, but I'll just say it this way. On one occasion, he inadvertently went out the outside door of his hotel room—because sometimes he didn't know whether he was going to a closet, a bathroom, or exiting the room because he traveled so much and changed rooms and often was drinking. That's what the state of affairs was, if it was late enough. This was not the way he was when making art, but sometimes it could get to that degree. And if he was waking up from a deep sleep, he wasn't sure. He traveled so much, the geography of a given room was not necessarily in his mind. So he walked out the door to his room—buck naked—and the door closed. He was locked out. Of course, on each floor, they had a babushka lady who guarded the elevators. And he was

obliged to walk up to one in all his glory and ask her if she could let him back into the room. That was not an unusual occurrence.

There was one time in— Do you want to hear these kind of stories?

Q: It's all part of the legend, the record, the history. It's what you remember. It's fine.

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Saff: I walked through the Capitol with him. He was there fighting for artist rights and a change in the copyright law, and he had me very much involved. He had me spend an entire summer here working on that. When we went to see—it wasn't [Edward M.] Kennedy that time. Kennedy was obviously the key person. But we were going to see the Republican from Vermont, whose name escapes me for a moment [note: Robert T. Stafford]. Bob was—

Q: [John H.] Sununu?

Saff: No, no. It was before Sununu.

Q: Oh, he's New Hampshire, sorry.

Saff: Yes. It was not Sununu. This guy was, not unlike Sununu, he was an advocate working with Kennedy to try and get the *droit moral*, the copyright, and the artist royalties legislated. Bob wanted a percentage of the resale price paid for a work to go back to the artist. A lot of people disagreed with him and eventually Bob switched the concept of artists getting royalties to all royalties should be donated to the National Endowment for the Arts. Because his idea didn't get traction—for artists retaining royalties rights. Guys like Roy just didn't understand it. It's like, you sell something, what do you do if the work goes down in value? You've sold your rights to it. And if you're talking about royalties, then maybe you're talking about editions, and editions are, in a sense, a way of getting royalties.

Signing of the California Resale Royalty Act, 1976. Pictured: Rauschenberg, Governor Jerry Brown, State Senator Alan G. Sieroty, and Rubin L. Gorewitz. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Harriet Zeitlin

Q: Or the use of the image.

Saff: Right, or the use of the image—copyright. And so, eventually Kennedy dropped the royalty part. He had to drop it in order to get the *droit moral* passed and to get the copyright law changed, which Bob financed. He financed me spending time here, like flying back and forth to meet members of Congress. And he hired a lobbying group—Gray & Company—to help me and to get me into certain offices. All of that was in the name of improving copyright laws and getting indemnification for works of art going out of this country, which we didn't have. And these are all things that didn't necessarily benefit him directly, but causes he believed in.

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Q: You told us yesterday that you delivered him to the Betty Ford Center [Rancho Mirage, California].

Saff: Yes.

Q: Was that a result of a particular incident, or just cumulative?

Saff: I think he had gone downhill fairly significantly. When we did that project called *Shales* [1994–95]—and I told you he was sitting outside and said, "Let the lightning take me"—I think he was at his lowest point. Darryl was with him at the time, as he was to the very end. But at the time, Darryl's father was dying, and so Darryl couldn't go with him to Betty Ford. He did convince him to go to Betty Ford. Actually, Darryl needed Betty Ford more than Bob did. That was Bob's oftentimes poor choice of who's around him. I don't think he was very good in terms of making some of those choices.

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 of Ruth and Don Saff

I got a call saying, "Would you take me out to Betty Ford?" I said, "Fine. I'll meet you in—" I was either up here or in New York or Maryland. He said, "No, no. You have to meet me in Florida. You have to come down to Florida and fly with me from Florida." "Okay, I'll fly with you from Florida." Why do I have to go down to Florida to go out to California? So I went down to Florida and I met him at the airport. And he seemed okay at the time. It was in the morning.

We were late, as usual—typical—late getting on the plane. They called for people to get on the plane. Of course, they called the first class first. And people had boarded. We hadn't gotten there yet. So, they were in the middle of calling seat twenty-two to twenty-eight or so. Bob walks up and he said to me, "Come, let's get on the plane." I said, "Well, there's this line." He said, "We're traveling first class." I said, "Yes, but they called first class already and they're calling these other rows— Why don't we wait?" He said, "I'm not waiting. I don't wait." So he just walked ahead of everybody and everybody's looking. And I'm standing there. I'm too cowardly to do anything. It's too awkward to do something like that. He didn't give that a second thought. He was traveling first class and it doesn't make any difference what anybody else thinks in terms of him getting to the head of the line or waiting in line. I didn't have the ability to do that.

We went out to Betty Ford, and Darryl asked me to keep track of him.

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On another occasion, I remember I was in Tampa at the time visiting, and I received a call from Darryl saying "Bob's having a stroke. He can't get his toothbrush to his mouth and couldn't feed

himself. There's something wrong." I was in pretty tight with people at [Johns] Hopkins [Hospital, Baltimore] and so Bob and Darryl wanted me to arrange for him to get to Hopkins. They had a plane pick up my wife [Ruth Saff] and me at the airport in Tampa and we flew on to Hopkins. The next day I'd arranged for doctors to see him, and through the people I knew, he had a battery of doctors who looked him over, performed many tests, and said that he did have one of those TIAs [transient ischemic attacks], and that he would have to go on Coumadin—blood thinner. And that he would be fine. Either take the blood thinner or drink, but you can't drink and take blood thinner. The reason is if you fall, something bad is going to happen. You're going to bleed.

We got out of the hospital that evening, went to the hotel. I decided instead of coming back out here [the eastern shore of Maryland], I would stay at the hotel with him. When we arrived at the hotel he went directly to the bar with Darryl and they ordered a drink. The next morning I was going to drive him back to his private jet. And I said sheepishly, "Bob, would you mind if I reviewed what the doctor said yesterday?" "No," he said, "you can do that." If I just said, "The doctor said so and so," he would then react negatively. But I asked him, and he said, "Fine." So I said, "If you take Coumadin, you can't drink. If you drink, you can't take Coumadin." "Got it." Well, you fast forward on that—of course, he did take Coumadin and he did drink. He did fall. He did bang his head. He refused to go to the emergency room. Two days later, he keeled over off one of his bar stools and because he had that brain swelling because of the blood thinner, hemorrhage damaged one side of his body, and then it was a downhill spiral for him.

The people he surrounded himself with—the people who wanted to help him, the Lawrences [Lawrence Voytek and Laurence "Laury" Getford] and all of that, who tried to get rid of the booze—were outvoted by the drinking contingent that was there, and those who supported his drinking. Basically, I guess he's responsible for his own fate, but certainly, some of these people didn't help.

Q: Had he a liquor of choice?

Saff: He was strictly Jack [Daniel's whiskey], yes. Occasionally, after abstinence, as he eased back into things—first it was wine. It's typical—"It's only wine." It's like right out of the AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] big book. "It's only wine." Then it was vodka. Then finally, he was back to Jack. But it was always Jack, yes.

Q: These days, and anticipating the research that art historians, historians, and biographers might do with all of this—with all of these oral history interviews—the new genres of scholarship, like gay studies and queer history, what were the sexual politics within his organization? Because obviously he's working with a lot of heterosexual people—women, men. But how did that inform—

Saff: That wasn't really an obvious component in being around Bob. You had no sense of an advocacy, or an agenda, or anything like that. You wouldn't necessarily know that he was homosexual or bisexual—which he was.

Q: That was a private matter for him.

Saff: It was a private matter. I remember an artist who was his friend early on—I forget her name—really wanted him to go to a gay rights parade. And he said, "I don't do that. That's not my thing. I don't do that. I'm not interested."

Q: So he didn't want to politicize his love life.

Saff: No. No. Fortunately, he was not promiscuous and he wasn't a drug user. So I think he fortunately dodged the bullet that people like [Robert] Mapplethorpe succumbed to. Because when he was with a person, he was basically with that person. That was it. There just was no feeling of his homosexuality. It was sensitive. So it was never an issue that I was aware of. And he certainly didn't select people because of, or anything like that. It was just not one of the requirements.

Q: One is sort of tempted, a little bit, to try to draw comparison between him—and his rock star kind of lifestyle with stretch limousines and the private planes—and somebody like Liberace. I don't know. There the similarity, perhaps, ends. Going everywhere first class. [Pause] I mean, people would be curious, and I think that some people would hope to find some encouragement that there was more of a gay agenda with how he conducted himself. But there was not.

Saff: Not at all. Not that I ever in all those years was ever aware of—watching him around people or whatever. Just even who he checked out, how he looked at people. I saw love affairs coming on, but you're talking about two or three in the course of decades.

Q: Right.

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Q: If we go back to ROCI a little bit, one of the things that seems to be a point of contrast is the response to the ROCI exhibitions around the world from artists and from the cultural community within those countries, versus the response to it from the critics here at home—that it was received, perhaps, here with less enthusiasm than it was in a number of the other countries where it went. What was your perception of that and how he reacted to that?

Saff: Well, my perception was that it was very enthusiastically received by the various countries, with, as I said before, the exception of those who thought that it was an extension of American imperialism and wanted to bring that out and sort that out with him. So sometimes it was contentious in terms of these discussions with students afterwards. But, for the most part, it was a great gift to the people that they received with great enthusiasm. In China, they really began talking about "art before Rauschenberg" and "art after Rauschenberg." To go to such places as Tibet—to bring the art there just was so unusual and had such a strong impact and the people were so appreciative. I think it made a big difference. I think historically that's been confirmed by people who subsequently went there. I know that somebody I had worked with when I was curating at the Guggenheim—one of the deputy directors—ended up going to Hong Kong and working with the mainland in terms of the impact of Bob in China. And she would convey to me the strength of that impact in terms of the students of that country.

But even here, who gave license to everybody? Bob. It's students here, it's students there. The governments, for the most part, even though they were not involved, I think, were quite thrilled. It didn't cost them any money. It was a big event. They didn't see the subtleties of what that would do in terms of undermining positions. Artworks sort of like Lamont Cranston [*The Shadow*]. You don't know what the Shadow's doing. He's there and it does have its effect, although you don't necessarily see it directly. This country, even in the writing—I remember in the writing of the National Gallery catalogue, Jack Cowart, who had worked with me—this was really uphill with the National Gallery. How do you sell the National Gallery on the idea of having a one-person show of a living artist when you're precluded from doing that by Congress? Now, clearly they made that rule at a time when your local senator could possibly go to the

National Gallery and influence choices, because they didn't have the power of curators and directors that could say no to those holding the purse strings. But the rule was still there when we approached the NGA. So, talking with Jack, who was pretty enterprising, and over a period of time, the idea was: okay, they'll have all these works gifted and in their collection. So basically, the exhibition would just be fleshing out work that's already in their collection with many more works and maybe we could sell it to them that way. And [J.] Carter Brown bought into it. He bought into it.

Now, unfortunately, Bob, who was going to be the first living artist to have a one-person show there, was upstaged by Jasper, who, somehow—because we arranged it, the rule was changed—he was able to have a drawing exhibition there before we got there. I was really angry. You think Bob was? No. Not that he would show. All this effort, all this negotiation—he conceived of having the show there. He was the trailblazer. Jasper slips in and has a show there. Didn't seem to bother him at all. These things just—I don't know whether it bothers him and he didn't show it. I think he played the ball where it laid. That's it. He played the hand he was dealt. However you want to put it. It's like, "Okay, this is the circumstance, I'll move with that." Or he would find it even interesting, I think, from the point of view of how these things could turn in an improbable way.

What else do you want to know about ROCI?

Q: Well, I'm curious to make a few comparisons. We know how the work he gave to the people of Mexico came into the collection of the Tamayo Museum. But how did that work in other

countries? Were there any other stories like that where he circumvented officialdom in order to give the work, the gift he was going to give to the people of a particular country?

Saff: I think in all cases.

Q: Are there particular instances you can—

Saff: Well, even in East Germany—it wasn't East Germany at the time. That show had to wait because the East German government wouldn't do an East Berlin/West Berlin show at the same time, even though we went back and forth and wanted to do the show simultaneously and have a television link between the two. And do a catalogue where you turned it over and the one side of the catalogue would be East and the other side would be West. They wouldn't do it. And so it wasn't until the [Berlin] Wall came down that the show just could take place in what was East Germany [Neue Berliner Galerie, Altes Museum, Berlin, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI BERLIN*, 1990]. It didn't have to be in two places at the same time.

Robert Rauschenberg
German Stroll (Deutscher Spaziergang) / ROCI BERLIN, 1990
Acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric collage on plywood panels in artist's frame
96 7/8 x 145 1/2 inches (246.1 x 369.6 cm)
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

The work for Germany was dismal work. Not qualitatively dismal. The subject matter was dismal because the place was dismal—whereas Cuba was all colorful and then the paintings were colorful. And, actually, in this instance, Bob gave it to the minister of culture, Mr. [Wolfgang] Polak [note: director of the Zentrum für Kunstausstellungen der Deutsche Demokratische Republik]. The minister of culture there was the guy who really wanted to undermine the government's position on the exhibition. He couldn't do it. So in a sense, in that case, he received the work for the people. Of course, he didn't want a work made for Germany, as he didn't completely understand the concept. He said, "Could I have one of those paintings from Cuba?"

[Laughter]

Saff: And I said, "No, you don't understand. You get the painting that was made for Germany, as that is your imagery." But, "No, I'd like to have the colorful Cuban painting." "No. This is what you get." So giving the work directly to the people wasn't a hard, fast rule. But eventually it had to go into a museum, hopefully, and so it just couldn't go to anybody. So the recipient was, in a sense, a figurehead for Bob who would receive it with the appearance of it going to the people of the country and then the work was housed in an official location. It was the process that was more important than the end product. It was how it was perceived as opposed to how it ended up. Because Bob cared about the art and it being housed properly and all of that, and certainly he didn't want to see it being any place other than where it would be available to the people. But, to give it to the people of the country is what his intention was. I think that that was pretty much the process through the whole tour—anybody who was helpful. The [State] Tretyakov Gallery

[Moscow] would get the work, but the person physically receiving it would be someone who was distanced from the government.

left:
Robert Rauschenberg
Poster for *ROCI USSR*, 1989
Offset lithograph
38 3/8 x 25 1/2 inches (97.5 x 64.8 cm)

right:
Rauschenberg in Red Square during preparations for *ROCI USSR*, Moscow, 1988. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Donald Saff

Q: A neutral party, a go-between.

Saff: In a sense, yes.

Q: How did that work in countries where there was a certain amount of pushback, a certain amount of suspicion that ROCI was, in some way, an extension of U.S. imperialism or U.S. foreign policy? Like Chile, for instance.

Saff: But I don't think that U.S. imperialism was something that was thought of by the government. It was more the students.

Q: Oh, the students.

Saff: The students—and not the government. There was never a situation where the government wasn't happy to receive the exhibition, or the state wasn't happy to receive the work or whatever. They didn't have a problem. It was the students who were shrewd and who thought they could see this tour as a gambit for the USIA to be advancing some agenda, which it wasn't.

Q: Cheerleading for American values or—

Saff: Right.

Saff: Which it wasn't. This thing, ROCI—this was pure. This is just pure Bob. It zigzagged to begin with, as I said, in terms of how you adjust it, but there was a learning process. Eventually, when Bob realized what it had to be to have fiscal integrity, he followed that. And he wouldn't take money after that. Even when it was offered—and it was—he wouldn't accept outside funding. I don't think that ROCI became a problem for the governments. They did not realize its potential impact. It was just the occasional student.

I started saying about Jack Cowart. Jack Cowart's original introduction to the NGA catalogue was problematic. He wrote an introduction in which he brought up this whole thing about the motive being questionable. American imperialism, cultural imperialism—I couldn't believe that he wrote that. I read the thing and I went back to him and I said, "I don't understand why you're writing this. After all we've done and what this has all been about, why do you have to write

that? Why do you have to exacerbate this issue?" I asked him to modify it and he did. He modified his introduction.

I guess one would always feel—and probably to this day—that Bob was either advancing a cause for himself or for somebody else or some other purpose. But I really think he thought that he would help facilitate communication and indirectly made an effort towards some sort of world peace through his art. He really felt that. His ego was sufficient to think that he could make a difference. And he did make a difference on one level or another. He absolutely made a difference.

Q: Apart from enterprises like ROCI, how did he espouse, or how did he reveal his own political convictions? Was there a lot of conversation about that with you, for instance? What did he say to you about how he felt about things that were happening politically in our government, in the country, in the world? Where did he stand on things?

Saff: I don't recall having any conversations with him that were in-depth about any given situation politically. On the other hand, his support—in terms of giving money, providing art—was almost without limit in terms of his heroes—[President John F.] Kennedy, and other liberals.

Q: FDR [President Franklin D. Roosevelt] I guess being the—

Saff: He loved all of them—everybody. He loved [Howard M.] Metzenbaum, he loved Kennedy. He's a solid liberal Democrat, straight up and down the line. And he put his money where his

mouth was and helped these people. So, the only thing that I saw was a statement that he was very supportive of Hillary Clinton. He was just very supportive of these people. I don't recall a conversation. I never knew whether he really knew the nuances of what the politics were or whether he just grasped the big picture. It's just he didn't show what was going on in his mind, relative to those issues—that is, to me.

Robert Rauschenberg
Retroactive I, 1963
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas
84 x 60 inches (213.4 x 152.4 cm)
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut
Gift of Susan Morse Hilles

Robert Rauschenberg
Hillary Rodham Clinton Campaign Print, 2000
Pigmented inkjet print
36 1/2 x 27 1/4 inches (92.7 x 69.2 cm)
From an edition of 100 published by the Hillary Rodham Clinton Campaign, produced by Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), West Islip, New York

Q: He watched a lot of TV. How about the news? Was the news of particular interest to him?

Saff: The news was as important as a soap opera. *The Young and the Restless* was as important as [*CBS Evening News* with] Dan Rather. It's all stuff.

Q: It's all just information that's out there.

Saff: It's all information. It's all information. All flows, and it goes in and it doesn't come out. It does not come out at all—

Q: Except as artwork.

Saff: Except his artwork. Right. Exactly. Except his artwork.

Q: So he becomes a filter, like a baleen whale that absorbs all this plankton.

Saff: I think a funnel, more than a filter.

Q: A funnel.

Saff: Yes. I don't think he filtered necessarily. He's too all-embracing to filter. And filtering is a value judgment. You didn't know how he made value judgments. I would watch him. You're with somebody long enough and it became a bit of a game for me to see: what would he select? He's making a work. You know his methodology, you know how he puts disparate things together. So you watch him work and you start thinking, "He's going to pick that image of a fireplace. He just has to. It's there, it's perfect for that work." I don't think I ever guessed correctly. Everything came from left field and came together in ways that you wouldn't anticipate. Now, maybe somebody else had greater skills than I, but he was unpredictable. He was unpredictable in the way in which the art went technically. He was unpredictable in the

selection of the subject matter. The only thing that was predictable was that everything was open-ended. That he liked questions, he didn't like answers. That he had a dialogue, he didn't offer a monologue. And that even titles were just a continuation of the art, as it began to extend out to the people, and the people had to participate.

You brought up *Eco-Echo* [1992–93], a project we did when he returned from the Earth Summit [United Nations Conference on Environment and Development] in Rio [de Janeiro, 1992]. He proposed a project for me and I didn't want to do it. And so somehow I eased him into something else. Of course, I think I eased him into an alternative, but it's like he's allowing me to ease him into something that he wanted to do in the first place. I can feel like I've manipulated the project, but he gets what he wants in the end. In any event, he's just so clever. He was so clever. You can't out-clever him.

Q: Why don't we take a break to check the equipment and maybe we could return and talk a bit about Rio, *Eco-Echo*, and his interest in art technology.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: 3PM | Session #3

Interviewee: Donald Saff | Location: Oxford, MD

Interviewer: James L. McElhinney | Date: August 16, 2013

Q: We're resuming our conversation and sort of coming to a close in the discussion about ROCI. Did Bob Rauschenberg ever voice any opinion about the contrast between the response to ROCI by people and artists in the countries where the exhibitions were held and the lukewarm response accorded by a lot of the critics here in America?

Saff: Lukewarm or negative didn't register with him—just didn't.

Q: He just ignored it.

Saff: Ignored it. Right. You don't know what went on internally with him, but the focus—I don't want to say the ego—but the focus was so powerful that these negative statements, either domestically or from students abroad, or whatever, just rolled off of him.

Q: So if he could ignore a gun held to his head, he could ignore a negative comment.

Saff: Absolutely. It didn't mean anything. It didn't mean anything. In fact, he would turn it so that if it wasn't negative, it wasn't good. If it wasn't negative, he wasn't doing what he should be doing. He should be upsetting people. He should be making people feel uncomfortable. He should be exposing them to things that they haven't been exposed to before. And unless he did

that, he wasn't producing art of any significance. It goes with the territory that he would accept these invectives as positive. He had a way of turning it so that it was positive.

Q: Negative reinforcement. Motivation from the disapproval of the conventional wisdom. Can you recall any one-liners that you ever heard him utter that would express that?

Saff: That turning?

Q: That idea that if they like it, it must be bad. Or if they don't like it, it must be good.

Saff: No, I never heard him say anything specifically other than that people should feel uncomfortable. But he was so circumspect about these things. It was just a given that people would not like what he does. He wouldn't be happy with positive reviews. He just wouldn't be happy. If he got positive reviews, then he was giving them something that they had seen before and were capable of being positive about because they were used to it. And unless he had them on edge—and he would say, "I'm not doing my job unless people are reacting in a negative way."

Q: How did that affect the way he was able to work with dealers, for instance? Most dealers would be over the moon with a positive review because it would help them to sell the work.

Saff: Well, if you had a negative review from John [E.] Canaday, it also would help you sell the work. So—

Q: Any review from John Canaday.

Saff: Or from Hilton Kramer.

Q: Right.

Saff: And so what you're saying is not exactly correct. The fact is that—

Q: Any attention is good.

Saff: Right. And that some of these reviews absolutely helped his career and helped crystallize or punch up in relief what he was all about. I don't know how it went with dealers. He kept his distance from dealers except for Ileana. He never wanted a dealer to feel comfortable, and he would say it's good that they feel uncomfortable. He never let anybody feel that they had him in their pocket. He never allowed that.

Q: You spoke about this yesterday just in terms that the domestic environment—the beanbag chairs and having to balance a dinner plate on your knees, and he would be always on his feet, hovering.

Saff: And when a dealer thought they could get just what they wanted or have you show when they wanted it, uh-uh. It wasn't going to be that way. He would go out of his way to throw a road

block up just when they were getting comfortable enough to think that they could begin to manipulate the schedule, what they were getting, when they were getting it, what they could buy. And he was very cautious about what he allowed people to buy as well. Towards the end, that began to change. But he was sure that he would never allow a dealer to acquire a lot of his work for fear that they could manipulate his reputation.

I'll give you an example. Let's see, like Sandro Chia who got killed by [Charles] Saatchi, okay? Not that it's a relevant comparison, but Saatchi gained control of his work and decided he didn't like Chia, dumped his art in large numbers, and basically ruined his market. Bob was ahead of that. Yes, Ileana got a lot of work from him, but basically it's because she didn't always pay for it. She never returned it. From time to time Bob would ask me to get an inventory of his work from Ileana. I'd go to her and she would say, "Oh, sure, Don. I'll let you know. I'll get back to you." She was always so sweet about it and she never got back to me with anything. She wasn't going to tell me anything. I knew that and Bob probably knew that. Occasionally he'd asked me to do that, but she just kept all these works. She must have owed him a fortune.

Q: Well, he was so prolific though. It must have been very hard for him as a young artist to keep track at all.

Saff: Yes. And in spite of the good recordkeeping, Ileana did have the ability to get a lot of work from him, which she was exhibiting either in Paris or in New York. And some of it just sort of stayed with her. *Dylaby* [1962], for example. I remember walking into the gallery years ago in Chelsea and there was one of Bob's early Combines that she had for—I don't know—decades

and decades. She didn't own it. He was able to get that back. God knows what else she had. I don't know that she ever paid for *Canyon* [1959]. I don't know what the story was with that.

Robert Rauschenberg
Dylaby, 1962
Combine: oil, metal objects, metal spring, metal Coca-Cola sign, ironing board, and twine on unstretched canvas tarp on wood support
109 1/2 x 87 x 15 inches (278.1 x 221 x 38.1 cm)
Private collection

Robert Rauschenberg
Canyon, 1959
Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror on canvas with oil on bald eagle, string, and pillow
81 3/4 x 70 x 24 inches (207.6 x 177.8 x 61 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of the family of Ileana Sonnabend

Q: So he had the same experience as a lot of artists trying to get paid for sales from dealers.

Saff: Well, except that he didn't make too big a deal out of it. Although I guess he was a little annoyed—he knew that Leo was financing Ed Ruscha, for example, by Bob's sales early on. The successful artists were, in a way, supportive of the newcomers. And I don't think that Bob ever made a big thing out of it. He just was not confrontational that way, but he kept track of it like he did the change of time on the clock. He knew everything that was going on and it all stayed with him. He could allow one to take advantage of him if it suited him, or he delighted in making you feel uncomfortable when you thought you were comfortable. He made every dealer feel that way at some point or another.

Q: So the work of the ROCI show was not for sale.

Saff: No.

Q: Where is it all now, other than the work that—

Saff: Oh, you know, eventually—

Q: Eventually?

Saff: Yes. Eventually, some of the work was shown at Gagosian's, but never during the exhibition and really not even immediately following the tour. [Note: Three ROCI works were on view in *Robert Rauschenberg* at Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2010–11.] He kept the ROCI work together. I'm not sure if he wished the exhibition in its entirety would go somewhere

representing the ROCI concept, or not. So he wasn't quick to sell it or take advantage of it even though some of the works were really quite extraordinary and certainly very salable, and dealers wanted access to it, but he didn't let it go.

Q: I was reading that, later in his life, he started hanging on to artwork, not wanting to let it out of the studio.

Saff: I think that that thread went along all the way through from the very beginning. He held on to certain works. I sold *Barge* [1962–63] to the Guggenheim in the early nineties. And so he still had those works in the nineties. Some Combines were not sold until later.

As he began to produce more and more, he began to hold onto the works that he really liked. Glimcher would come and want this, that, and the other, and Bob would hold back certain works—"No. I want to keep that. No." "But that's critical." So he'd say, "Okay. Put it in the show, but it's not for sale." So yes, he began to hold onto works. And that's probably the only judgment call that he made in terms of his progeny, that of keeping certain works that he thought were important. He kept certain works for historic reasons as well. He thought that they would be important to be part of a museum in the future, and that was also something that was not defined completely by him. I don't think he necessarily wanted a museum that would be named for him. But he was happy to negotiate the arrangement with Krens and the Guggenheim, where a large number of works would be given to the Guggenheim in the context of a big Frank Gehry facility in which it would be just the component of a larger museum. So you would come across a wealth of Rauschenberg's work in the context of other works as opposed to a Rauschenberg museum.

And he explored that. He had me and he had David and he had Bennet Grutman, his accountant, go to the [Andy] Warhol Foundation [for the Visual Arts, New York] and go down to the [Andy] Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and go other places and report back to him what was going on elsewhere with artists' works in museums. Very savvy. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Robert Rauschenberg
Barge, 1962–63
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas
79 7/8 x 386 inches (202.9 x 980.4 cm)
Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and with additional funds contributed by Thomas H. Lee and Ann Tenenbaum; the International Director's Council and Executive Committee Members: Eli Broad, Elaine Teer Cooper, Ronnie Heyman, J. Tomlinson Hill, Dakis Joannou, Barbara Lane, Robert Mnuchin, Peter Norton, Thomas Walther, and Ginny Williams; and funds from additional donors: Ulla Dreyfus-Best, Norma and Joseph Saul Philanthropic Fund; Elizabeth Rea; Eli Broad; Dakis Joannou; Peter Norton; Peter Lawson-Johnston; Michael Wettach; Peter Littmann; Tiqui Atencio; Bruce and Janet Karatz; and Giulia Ghirardi Pagliai

Q: What were his opinions of what was going on at the time with the Clyfford Still Museum plans? Was he aware of that and watching that at all?

Saff: No. I don't think so.

Q: Because you know, that's a peculiar thing where all of this work that was in the estate of Clyfford Still is now going to Denver—is in Denver only because they won the bid, I think. But I

don't think that Still ever had any close association with Denver, nor was there any reason for him to have a museum there.

Saff: I don't remember any discussion about that. He did like Clyfford Still's work, I must say, but I don't know. There was no discussion about—

Q: Are there any specific remarks or observations that you ever heard him share about the work of Clyfford Still?

Saff: He said Still was a very powerful artist and that's all I recall him saying. He didn't go into details—that he would say something positive about somebody was already a remarkable thing. And for me to say that he liked Clyfford Still is sort of momentous.

Q: Read between the lines. So that just by itself—

Saff: Right. It's just not to me or in my presence that he ever articulated in depth any of these things. It was in the course of an ongoing conversation in which you'd get a nod towards a given person, generally no negatives, always a little nod towards a person, but he was never a cheerleader for anybody, except maybe Matisse.

Q: So to use a word like powerful would be hyperbolic for him.

Saff: Yes. I would say.

Q: So were they acquainted personally?

Saff: I don't know. I don't know whether he knew Still.

Q: Why don't we talk a little bit about Rauschenberg's interest in the sort of art and technology nexus.

Saff: Well, I'll finish up on the *Eco-Echo* because he had come back from the Rio Summit and was really outraged at our government not signing on to that accord.

Robert Rauschenberg
Eco-Echo III, 1992–93
Acrylic and silkscreened acrylic 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
Collection of Nurture New York's Nature

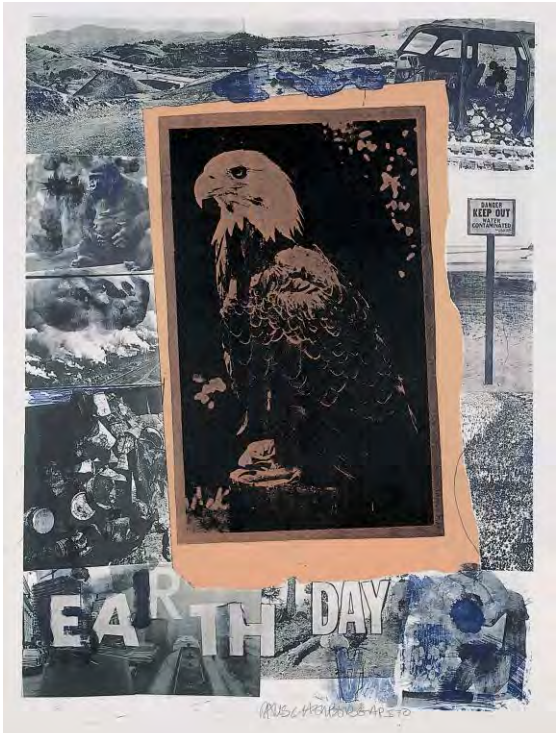
Rauschenberg with *Eco-Echo I*, 1993.
Photo: Donald Saff

Rauschenberg and Donald Saff discussing the *Eco-Echo* project, Saff Tech Arts, Oxford, Maryland, 1993. Courtesy of Saff Tech Arts. Photo: George Holzer

Q: Well, I think we had the conversation about this off the record, so maybe you could just start with the conference in Rio, why he was there, and what they were.

Saff: Well, there was an Earth Summit and he went because of his advocacy for—he did the first Earth Day poster [1970] and produced and supported as much as you could, relative to the environment. He went there. It was something that provided great disappointment for him because of the strength of his advocacy.

Robert Rauschenberg
Last Turn—Your Turn [print for Earth Summit '92 the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil], 1991
Offset lithograph
25 x 26 inches (63.5 x 66 cm)
From an edition of 200, published by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, produced by Ivy Hill through the auspices of Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York



Robert Rauschenberg
Earth Day, 1970
Lithograph and collage
52 1/2 x 37 1/2 inches (133.4 x 95.3 cm)
From an edition of 50, published by The American Environment Foundation, produced by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

When he got back, he was due for a project with me, and he wanted to do this box—this coffin-like thing—which he was going to cover with, I don't know, license plates or something. It probably would have been a great project, just not something that I was interested in doing. I was driving to Virginia and saw windmills as I went down. And I thought, my god, here's another wheel of sorts that would appeal to Rauschenberg, and won't I be clever to suggest that to him. And actually, there was one company in this country that was still producing the windmills that you put on the back forty to produce water for the cattle. And I was able to get one of the windmill fans and install it over in the shop. He came up from Captiva and I had a box that he

wanted to do in one corner with no light on it and the windmill fan hanging up with bright lights on it. I did it to be stupidly obvious, because he would get a kick out of that rather than trying to do it subtly. So he looked at both. He said, “Okay. I get the message.” He said, “So you want to do these windmills.” “Yes.” He said, “I’ll do it.” He said, “Providing it doesn’t waste energy.” He said, “You can’t waste energy.” So he said, “I only want this to work if there is a participant, a viewer, an audience.” That was the ground rules. And he leaves and I’m stuck with—okay, how do you make this work?

So I had to design this whole thing. I knew that he was going to do the imagery for the blades, but not the mechanics. So I—very cleverly, I thought—used a bicycle wheel and put a drive belt on the wheel to a motor, and I thought, okay. I have a bicycle wheel, a motor. I will put sonar in the base so that when you walked up to the fan, you would, at just the right distance, make the blade turn. If you walked away, it would turn off. He loved it. He absolutely loved it. And I thought I really made a big contribution and introduced this guy to some new areas of expression. Eventually, looking through his work, I realize how often he used a windmill in photographs and painting. I just couldn’t believe it. For all of the work, I never saw that. And then I looked at another photograph in which he had the exact combination of bicycle wheel and belt on a pump that was on the outside of somebody’s house in a rural area that was the same configuration as the bicycle wheel and belt and all of that except that was on a water pump. So my so-called innovation was nothing new to him. He was there first on everything. You couldn’t bring anything to him that he didn’t have some experience with, or that he couldn’t use in an effective way. So that was one of the works that I did with him that employed technology. Of

course, the other ones use technology in different ways. But this one plugged in the wall. And he was very happy. We finished it up in Captiva and he loved the work.

We showed it in Hiroshima—that was an interesting trip. He was getting some sort of peace award [Hiroshima Art Prize, 1992]. I think Issey Miyake received the first one. He received the second one. So I went with him to Japan. We stopped in Hawaii first and I wanted to go see the [USS] Arizona [Memorial, Pearl Harbor, Honolulu] and I said, "There's the memorial. You want to go see that?" And he said, "No. I don't want to see that." He didn't want to go see it. It was a peculiar trip. The award was being given in Hiroshima and we started off in Pearl Harbor. What a peculiar combination of things. The show in Hiroshima was beautiful. *Eco-Echo* was shown there, and he received the award, and he made a very gracious statement. He was great with the people when he was working.

We went to see the remnants of the buildings and the shadows of people who were burned. It is very emotional for me, and I looked at him and said, "Bob, what do you think of this?" And he said, "They asked for it." I just was amazed that this great humanitarian would say, "They asked for it." But if you put it into context, here he was in the Navy at the end of the war dealing with these GIs who were coming in from the Pacific—

Q: Of course.

Saff: —and saw the effect of war on his comrades. And again, he didn't want to see the negative and he didn't want to see the positive. He didn't want to go in Hawaii to see that and he really

didn't want to see anything in Hiroshima. He wanted to go there, get his award, have his show, meet with everybody he can meet with, and only do positive, productive things—not dwell on the past. It's just by some chance that we ended up in that bombed area, not by his choice. And in that case, he made his feelings really clear—and it's very unusual for him to make a statement like that. I was really sort of surprised, but I understood it.

Anyhow, *Eco-Echo* was a late example of his interest in technology, which, in general, was started in collaboration with [Johan Wilhelm] Billy Klüver and E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology], and the various evenings at the Judson [Memorial Church, New York]. For him, I don't know, paintbrushes just didn't grow on trees. They were not natural. Therefore, any tool, process, or method was a viable vehicle. There was nothing that was a given. He could see that. So technology was just another conduit. Any conduit would work for him, and why not technology? Why not be expressive with electrons as opposed to a paintbrush and paint?

Q: So were there any other projects that you and he collaborated on that used the technology in any kind of significant way?

Saff: Well, digital technology in terms of making frescoes.

Q: Oh, right. Yes.

Saff: By combining one of the oldest techniques with modern digital technology.

Q: Oh, the woodcut?

Saff: No. I came up with a process of transferring digital images to fresco—wet plaster. And I went to Bob and said, "How about developing this?" and he immediately took to it. The same thing is true with digital technology as with the *Shales* in which we transferred into wax. We hadn't worked with wax before. I showed him, what do you call them, Fayum waxes at the Metropolitan of the Roman sarcophagi.

Portrait of the Boy Eutyches, Roman Period, 100–150 CE
Encaustic on wood, paint
14 15/16 x 7 1/2 inches (38 x 19 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1918

Q: Oh, yes.

Saff: The portraits and how vivid the—

Q: Fayum.

Saff: Fayum. Right.

Q: The Egyptian portrait.

Saff: Right. So showing him that and saying that there's something about wax that when you bury color into it, it gives it a luminosity that no other medium possesses.

Q: Like Marden and Johns used it.

Saff: Right. And he loved that. He loved the fact that this was another way of putting together something that was completely new technologically in terms of—I couldn't have done it unless there was a development in digital technology in printing and my own particular way of then transferring it to wax rather than collaging onto wax, and all those had appealed to him. So yes, they're all technology pieces. Just like when I first started working with Bob at Graphicstudio using blueprint chemistry for printing purposes on fine paper and then transferring images—traditional printing—on these novel papers that were not ever meant to be print papers [note: *Made in Tampa* series, 1972–73]. So it's like this odd combination of material and processes that he pieced together, which you wouldn't anticipate.

Robert Rauschenberg
Tampa 3, 1972
Lithograph with collage and graphite
43 7/8 x 47 x 1/4 inches (111.4 x 119.4 x .6 cm)
From an edition of 20 Arabic numerals and 20 Roman numerals, published by Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa

Well, it was easy to sell him on those ideas because these were techniques that were not just technical muscle-flexing. They had a purpose in terms of the content of what he was doing, and so he could see the value. It wasn't an easy sell though. He made it difficult. He never was sold easily. You're always timing it. How do you bring it up in a conversation? And he knew that you wanted to do a project. He never made it easy. He never made it easy. You didn't have to grovel. You just had to suffer over the timing. And then when he did a project, nobody did a project more efficiently than he did. When he said he was going to do it, he did it. And he knew what he was doing straight ahead, but open to possibilities. It wasn't like, "I see a goal and I'm going there." He'll go that way if he had to but another way if he could. But he's totally, totally, completely dedicated to it. In that way he was the easiest artist to work with once you got the project going.

Q: So the process you described yesterday, the photo-mechanical woodcut.

Saff: Right.

Q: Did he ever go back and, let's say, revisit that kind of a process using digital means?

Saff: Did he ever use—?

Q: Did he ever go back—because I'm assuming that was done in a kind of a—

Saff: He never used that process.

Q: Oh, he never used that process. You used that process.

Saff: Yes. He never used that process, no. I did that process with Pearlstein.

Q: Oh. That's right.

Saff: Then I had a show of my own, a retrospective of my own work at the Tampa Museum [of Art, Florida], and I did a large work called *War Piece* [1989]. And I got the name of every war I could find from the beginning of time until the date of that show and sandblasted that into the surface of the wood, and it had birds, and it had a clock on it, and all of that. Big piece, 14 feet wide. Bob came into the show. I'd finished it the day before and hung it up and boy was I happy with it. And we stood before that piece. Bob was there. And he said to me, "Boy, you really blew it on that one. That's really overworked." This is my show, my opening, and that guy says that to

me. You know, if I had said that to him, he would be crying for days. He would be telling everybody what a monster I was. His best friend, whatever, just hates his work. He could be really, really cruel that way. He could really be cruel. He could really be cruel.

Q: You said yesterday—

Saff: And so he wouldn't use the same blasting.

Q: Oh, he wouldn't use it because it was not his idea.

Saff: Well, it was already full blown. It was already being used.

Q: But wasn't he using techniques similar to Warhol? Warhol was using screenprinting.

Saff: Oh, yes.

Q: But this was different.

Saff: But that was screenprinting—which was around forever. But once something was co-opted, he didn't want to be just on the bandwagon, especially being used by someone who is not a player in a sense. It's like I mentioned earlier, any process that was developed was always offered to him in an open-ended way as if it wasn't completely developed. I might think I know every possibility for its application technically and still I wouldn't reveal that to him. I'd still go

to him with a partially developed idea and let him make his contribution, and with that, he was comfortable. And, in fact, by doing that, he did contribute to it in ways that I would not have anticipated. I don't think screenprinting is an equivalent in that particular case.

Q: No. But he sounds a bit like the old pioneer who, once people arrive they start laying out streets for the town and erecting houses, he moves his tent out onto the prairie another ten miles.

Saff: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: He was very conscious of keeping himself free of being included in a dialogue about certain techniques or image-making, or what have you. He wanted to be independent of all that. Well, you used the term maverick yesterday.

Saff: Yes.

Q: That was a conscious—

Saff: Yes. Because he was contrary. He was just contrary. And by being contrary—his contrariness was not being simply difficult but was bringing new information to the table. If there was a given, then he would say, "Well, what about this? You accept that. What about this? Doesn't this, then, create doubts about that?" It was just always stirring the pot. He was always the irritant. He was always like the irritant that made the pearl. He just inserted himself—

insinuated himself into every process, into every idea—and made something wonderful come out of it.

Q: Let's talk a little more about Captiva. We've sort of addressed it a little bit in terms of his hospitality—sort of inhospitable hospitality.

Rauschenberg and Donald Saff, Captiva, Florida, 1977. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 1977

Saff: Oh, yes. Very hospitable inhospitality, right.

Q: Hospitable inhospitality, or inhospitable hospitality?

Saff: Hospitable. You went there, and if you were a guest, you had a wonderful meal. You had lively conversation that was mostly about Bob.

Q: Meal might be late, though. You said it might be in the middle of the night.

Saff: Depends upon what decade you're talking about. It got earlier and earlier. In the seventies, before David, it was late at night. You had to do a whole lot of drinking. I stopped drinking twenty-six years ago, twenty-seven years ago. I just couldn't keep up with it and I made a decision at that point that I wasn't going to go down that road with him, and I just stopped because it was just nonstop drinking up until the time that we went to work. And of course, he was fine. You know? I wasn't up to it.

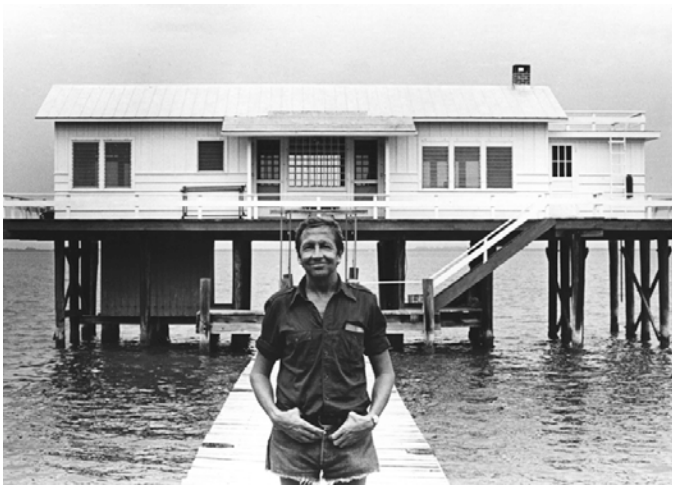
But anybody who would come and visit, they would be there for the work as well. They'd have dinner. He'd make this wonderful dinner and then he'd go over to the shop, and oftentimes they would come and watch him work. He certainly had an open situation in the studio. He was the consummate collaborator. He said, "With two people, you always have at least three ideas." What I took that to mean is that you have an idea, I have an idea, and the combination is more than the two. He had no problem with people being around when he worked. It was hard for me to conceive of initially. It was a completely open situation. He wasn't hiding anything technically. Obviously, he didn't want banter necessarily going on when he was thinking about something, but you got the message about when to be quiet and do something else or just watch. But it was a totally open and fluid situation. In that sense, it was very hospitable. You went there and you left there—if you weren't engaged, as I was, having to get something done and get a project—you left there always better than when you arrived. You knew more. You experienced more. It was always positive artistically.

Q: How many people might be there at any point in time? Acquaintances, assistants, coworkers, friends—what was the capacity?

Saff: He could have four, five, six people standing around. Everything was big, open.

Q: And you were talking about the [J. N.] Ding Darling [Fish] House.

Saff: Yes. There was like a moat around it almost. It had a drawbridge and sat out on stilts, and was absolutely perfectly symmetrical and glorious. He had fixed it up and it was just a place where only special people could go. He didn't say that but it was obvious that nobody was invited to stay there—with the exception that I'm aware of, David Byrne, when he came down. I think David went there and did composing and stayed out at that isolated property. But his studio faced that, built a studio sort of facing the Ding Darling House. The studio was huge, big, white, giant, sterile inside. He produced the "decorations." Studio architecture or interior wasn't going to produce any decorations for him. I remember him coming to my house in Maryland and I had a chandelier—an Art Nouveau chandelier—that I purchased in Paris. He was staying at—my house is white too inside—and he was standing there saying, "God, what's that ugly thing doing there?" He's in my house. "What's that ugly—"



Rauschenberg in front of the Fish House, Captiva, Florida, 1979. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Terry Van Brunt

Q: I'm seeing a pattern here.

Saff: I said, "What are you talking about?" "That chandelier." I said, "What's the problem with the chandelier?" He says, "It's terrible." Okay. "Why is it terrible, Bob?" And he said, "It interferes with conversation. It takes away from conversation. It distracts." Apparently distracted from him. And he had a problem—he had an ego problem with the chandelier.

Q: It lights the room too when the sun's down.

Saff: Yes. Rather than him illuminating all things. Really. The guy was so remarkable. And while these things might be painful for the moment, they were all revelatory in terms of what he was about, what triggered him positively, negatively, whatever. And if you could ride over these things, it could be a positive learning experience. Sometimes it hurt though.

Q: Were people often offended? Did anyone ever leave because they were insulted or there was a perceived affront? Someone like a movie star walked in and he insulted her shoes or something, and she walked out?

Saff: I don't know that he did that with people that he didn't—you can insult Stuckey because Stuckey needed him. He didn't need Stuckey. But he wouldn't insult Sharon Stone or somebody like that. He was not an equal opportunity—

Q: —insulter.

Saff: No. He's not.

Q: How did he become acquainted with Gene Kelly?

Saff: I don't know. I think that all has to do with L.A. and Gemini and being out there a lot making prints. So the Hollywood connection was there, the Gene Kellys and Dustin Hoffmans, and Billy Wilder. These are all people that may be invited to dinner and he got to know them. He got to know some of these people through fundraisers—amfAR, whatever—where there was a common interest. Lily Tomlin—he adored Lily Tomlin. I'm not quite sure whether it was the Hollywood connection or whether it was the charitable causes connection or a combination of that.

Dustin Hoffman and Rauschenberg at Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles, ca. 1980s. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen

Q: I know at the end of his life that Gene Kelly had a place in [County] Clare, in Ireland. Did Bob Rauschenberg travel and stay with—

Saff: Not that I'm aware of.

Q: —with people?

Saff: Travel and stay with people?

Q: Always hotels?

Saff: He liked hotels. He liked hotels a lot. He liked hotels too much.

Q: Houseguest was not his preference.

Saff: Being a houseguest? You know, of course, I don't know how he did at the [Mohandas Karamchand] Gandhi Ashram [Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad, India] when he did that project with the Sarabhais. There, he had to be a houseguest. But for the most part, he liked hotels. He liked the kind of anonymity of a hotel room. The problem was that once he got into a hotel room, it was hard to get him out. He wasn't your typical American tourist that had an agenda and had to see ten thousand different things in a day when he went to a particular place. He'd get up in the morning late. He wouldn't eat that much and he would eat slowly. And it would be exotic food, gourmet food, and was now one o'clock or two o'clock, and you want to get him out of the hotel room to go do something or whatever. And maybe he'll lay back because there's a meeting at five o'clock relative to a show or meeting somebody. The end result is that you've never gotten

out of the hotel room. And if he tried to get out of the hotel room and if he sensed that you wanted out, then he might say, “Let’s talk. Let’s talk about something. Let’s watch this. Let’s watch the news. Let’s watch a show. Let’s just schmooze.” However, when he was doing a project he would get out with his camera and keep going.

Q: He had a turtle named Rocky.

Saff: Yes.

Rauschenberg in his Lafayette Street studio with his turtle, Rocky, and his work *Tantric Riddle (Spread)* (1981), New York, 1981. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Michael Abramson

Q: What you’re describing seems to me to be slightly tortoise-like behavior. How did he acquire Rocky?

Saff: Rocky was—

Q: Oh, I heard the story, yes.

Saff: Oh, Rocky was one of the tortoises that was in the performance. [Note: *Spring Training*, 1965]

Q: That piece. Yes.

Saff: And so Rocky—

Q: —is a stage turtle.

Saff: Yes. And Rocky, of course, he played with the ROCI term. I had shown him a picture of a turtle with a stele on its back, which was a Chinese symbol. And I'm not quite sure how and where he put Rocky together with ROCI, but eventually, it worked for him. All these things did. Nobody could come up with a title better than Bob could. He loved doing that. He loved titling his work.

Q: So the turtle pre-dated the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange.

Saff: Yes. Absolutely.

Q: It's amusing too to ponder that the [Sylvester] Stallone character had pet turtles. The pugilist Rocky had—

Saff: Did he? Oh, really?

Q: —two pet turtles, one named Cuff the other one named Link, as I remember.

Saff: Oh, really? I missed that. That's good.

Q: It's sort of turtle trivia.

Saff: That's good.

Q: How did Milton become Bob?

Saff: As he told me, I think he was either at an airport or a train station. He didn't want to be called Milton anymore and he decided he wanted to change his name. He couldn't abide by the name Milton. So what he did was a name game; everything had a method. It's like gathering debris for his Combines in New York. He gave himself a walk around the street. He was allowed to do that twice. If he didn't get anything, he could go one block more and come back. And if he didn't get anything then, he wouldn't do anything more. So that was it for the day. And with the

name Bob, what he decided was he wanted to change his name so he wanted, I guess, in a sense, the most innocuous name he could get.

Q: It's a palindrome, right? B-O-B. B-O-B.

Saff: Well, it is, but what he did was, according to him, he wrote down the name of every person that he knew, and the game was that the one that he wrote down the most would be the name that he would take. And so he wrote down the names and Bob came up most, or Robert came up the most. And so that became his name. That's how he selected it.

Q: He told you that.

Saff: He told me that.

Q: And was that an oft-told tale to new friends?

Saff: I have no idea.

Q: And you only ever heard him tell you that tale?

Saff: Right. So I don't know what he told anybody else.

Q: Probably a different story.

Saff: Possibly, possibly. Pretty much there was continuity in what he said. I didn't often find him saying something that he generally didn't say to somebody else, although I don't know what he said to other people.

Q: I understand he was fond of gardens and flowers.

Saff: He loved flowers.

Q: You spoke about him going to the Huntington to see *Pinkie* when he was in the Navy. So what were his thoughts on gardening and flowers?

Saff: Just passionate. Night-blooming cereus. He loved all of that. He loved all of that and he had the best taste in flowerpots and flowers. He would make the most elegant arrangement you can imagine. He loathed anything that—like when you send a bouquet and it has fill. Whatever they put in. He hated that.

Q: Queen Anne's lace or spray ferns, any of that stuff.

Saff: Right. Exactly. He hated that stuff and was very intolerant of that, but he would get calla lilies. He loved calla lilies or stargazers—loved lilies—and put them in these long pots and punctuate a corner of a room with them. They were just always perfect. Just like the titles of his work, it was just perfect. Just boing! It just rang out. Every hotel room that he was in, every

place that he was in, there was always a perfectly placed set of flowers. People would send him flowers. They'd get shoved off in a corner. He would get what he wanted and it would just really light up the room. He was great that way, just great. What an eye. He genuinely loved it.

Rauschenberg in his Beach House, Captiva, Florida, 1971. Work in background is *Tropicana Channel (Cardboard)* (1971). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Hans Namuth © Hans Namuth Estate

Q: Did he ever do any of his own gardening? David told me he had a little patch of herbs at the foot of the kitchen steps where he could descend and pluck a leaf of something.

Saff: You know, I don't know what he did early on. It's like with the dogs. He loved the dogs. Did he ever go out and play with the dogs? I don't think I ever saw him do that. Did he ever take the dogs to the vet? I don't think I ever saw him do that. He had it taken care of by others.

Q: He had people to do that for him.

Saff: He had people. He was very responsible about all of that stuff. But did he go out and physically play with them or whatever? No. He loved them and he pet them and they'd come up

to him. But I don't know that he did that kind of work—whether he worked in a garden or not. I never saw him work in a garden. There were gardens around and they were growing herbs. I never saw him physically do it. Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't. I didn't see it.

Q: Or oversee it.

Saff: He oversaw everything. So if it was there, he oversaw it and called all the shots down to what was planted, where it was planted, or where the flowers went, where the dogs went, what they looked like, how they were groomed. He oversaw everything.

Q: So he moved to Captiva in the early seventies, was it? Yes. [1970]

Saff: Yes, earlier.

Q: And so that was before you knew him, right? Or was that about the time?

Saff: He already owned the property there for a while. [Note: Rauschenberg bought his first property in Captiva in 1968.]

Q: Right.

Saff: He was spending more time down there. At the point that I started being involved with him, he was first really establishing himself in Captiva and setting up the ground rules for himself.

Rather than walking around the city and finding material there, he decided to work with what he could find on the island. And of course, it started off with what's there. There was sand and there's always something being shipped to him in a cardboard box.

So the first works were, "Okay, this is what's available to me. This is what I'll make in terms of art. I guess the *Early Egyptian* series [1973–74] and other works that were cardboard boxes, or cardboard boxes with sand applied to it, were the products. The art was a product of "I live in Captiva and this is the material that I have to work with." The guy was consistent, flawlessly consistent.

Rauschenberg and studio assistant adhering sand to *Early Egyptian* series (1973–74) on the beach in Captiva, Florida, ca. 1973. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni

Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled *(Early Egyptian)*, 1973
Cardboard, sand, Day-Glo paint, bicycle, fabric, twine, and metal bucket on wood stand
155 1/2 x 203 x 47 inches (395 x 515.6 x 119.4 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: So the conceptual armature of the work was, in that sense, really rigorous.

Saff: In?

Q: In that sense, really rigorous that he was committed to that process of using materials that were available to him.

Saff: Right. Whatever was bountiful and available to him and probably least likely to be used in the context of a work of art was what he used. All of that neglected material—and there sure is a lot of neglected sand on beaches throughout the world—and Bob was there to save it.

Q: So apropos to the grounds and the gardens and the improvements and the landscaping, what was his involvement? I imagine he was determining the locations of roads, gardens, the jungle paths. How did he do that? Did he make drawings? Did he just simply walk out there with a gardener and say, "I want it here. Stake it out"?

Saff: Yes. He had full-time people. He had a full-time gardener. He would go pick out trees. He would go to nurseries and all and he laid it out. Then, of course, Darryl helped him design a house. But Bob, he allowed that to happen as a way of having his liaison with people. But it was Bob at the controls all the time. It was always Bob at the controls.

Q: Imagine interest on the part of art historians, let's say, to draw some kind of comparison between Rauschenberg at Captiva, [Claude] Monet at Giverny [France] or [Frederic Edwin] Church in Olana [New York]. It's kind of artists creating their own natural realm of physical universe that was expressive of who they were and naturally is a work of art in itself. Because what we've been speaking about for a couple days—and actually the day before I'd been

speaking to David and I guess I asked him if he thought that Bob Rauschenberg looked at an exhibition installation as a work of art. He said that he thought that perhaps he did. And I was wondering if Bob Rauschenberg looked at his home on Captiva as a work of art.

Saff: Yes. Everything was placed where he wanted it placed. But then he'd do weird things like have a ping pong table in the middle of everything, which I never understood. Everything else was like boing, boing, boing. Everything is perfect, and then there'd be a ping pong table in the middle of things. Yes. I think all of these things were works of art. His exhibitions as a work of art—you asked that of David. It's an interesting issue with his exhibitions because in a sense, just like his art, nobody could lay out a show better than Bob. Nobody could hold a corner better than Bob. He knew the problems of corners and rooms. And you know, you're never as much aware of it until you see him hang something that deals with a corner. Brilliant. His Achilles' heel was that he loved all his works. So the tendency to overcrowd the show was inevitably there. If I, or someone, would suggest spare, he knew that meant that one of his babies was not going to be in the show and that was tough for him to take. So it was always this sort of compromise of what you should put in a show and what he wanted in a show.

Q: I also understand there was a conflict between, let's say, AAM-approved [American Alliance of Museums] light levels and what he would like to have seen in terms of lighting in a show. David told us a story about one of the exhibitions where he walked in and he said, "Everything looks great. Double the lighting."

Saff: Well, I remember a television interview he did. What was it, *Nightline*? I remember because he had to come up to Tampa to go to the network studios. I think it was ABC studios for *Nightline* ["Disintegrating Works of Art," August 9, 1985]. He was on a program with Larry Rivers. I don't know whether it was [Edward James] Ted Koppel—who was a friend of his at that time or eventually—who asked him some questions about the longevity of his work in terms of the fugitive material he was using. And I think his response was something like, "You know what? Why would it be any different than buying a car? You buy a car. You know it wears out after a while." He said, basically, "I don't care about that. All I care about is what the quality of the work is and I will give the conservators work to do in the future if it's problematic in terms of the process." So he didn't care about those aspects of things technically. But I was getting at that for another reason.

Q: Light levels. Installation.

Saff: The light levels. He didn't care about the work's longevity necessarily and he didn't care about the damage that light would do to work. "What is the point? Why are we saving this? I want people to see things now," he would say. It was never more clear than when we did the ROCI show at the National Gallery. Again, I got caught in the middle of that because [Gaillard F.] Gil Ravenel, I guess, was the designer there under Carter. The design team at the National Gallery ran the show. Gil was very close with Carter and he had the last word in terms of all of the archival approaches to light levels. And Bob wanted the lights up. And Gil Ravenel said no. I had to go to Roger Mandle, who was then the deputy director, and ask him to turn the light level up. And it was a big controversy that went on. Bob, again, stood his ground. He was not going to

have people squinting at the work. He wanted the work seen the way he wanted it seen. And they had to turn the light level up for him. “To hell with the future, I want people to see the work now.” I respect what museums want to do and what Thomas Buehler does for Bob’s work by ensuring the fact that you can’t go above a certain number of lumens. But if Bob were around, he would say, “Just cool it. I want the light level where I want it. I want people to see the show.”

Q: Well, as a museum person yourself—you worked at the Guggenheim—I’m sure you have lots of experience with worried conservators. David told a tale about an early Rauschenberg piece, which had used Scotch tape that yellowed. And a conservator contacted him and asked should they replace the tape with a more archival tape that would reproduce the original appearance of the piece. And his response was?

Saff: I don’t know what his response was. You tell me.

Q: Okay. I was hoping that you had heard the—

Saff: No. I mean, I know what the response would be. But—

Q: But apparently, he said that the impermanence in the material is part of the piece.

Saff: Right.

Q: And it ought to be allowed to just continue to deteriorate.

Saff: That's what his point was on *Nightline*—that this is the nature of it. If you accept the vulnerability of everything from cars to other things, then just accept the vulnerability in terms of the art.

Q: Well, he had a lot of admiration, I imagine, for Marcel Duchamp as an artist, and of course, the great piece that is now in Philadelphia that is continuing to fall apart in *The Large Glass* [*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1913–23]. That's just part of what the art is about—what the piece is about is that you go there year after year. It's a piece I've seen. I think I first encountered it at age twelve and it seemed like every year, something's missing. Something is falling apart.

Saff: But Bob liked things that were falling apart. Even people. Even people.

Q: Explain.

Saff: I noticed that he had a sort of proclivity to people who had physical problems—whether they were fat or skinny or malformed or had a limp or whatever—it seemed to attract him, these differences. It's bizarre and it's just an observation that I had. And actually, I think it was borne out slightly in terms of the observation when his arm became withered. I was initially surprised that he allowed himself to be photographed in a way that really put that arm, as tortured as it was, front and center. He had no problem. With his ego, of course—my God, his teeth were perfect. He did do—what do you call—plastic surgery? He was very vain about his appearance.

He's handsome to begin with and he wanted to maintain—I mean, the guy was gorgeous. But there was a kind of sympathy for people who just were slightly disfigured. And he'd have a sense that it never fazed him, in a way, that these people were disfigured. I never quite understood it, but it is his general acceptance of everything I guess.

Irving Penn
Robert Rauschenberg, New York, 2005

Q: Was it compassion? Was it—

Saff: I think so. Well, I think he would not allow compassion to come into play because that would degrade the person or object he was being compassionate about. They demanded more dignity than compassion. It wasn't compassion. It was just embracing everything and everybody irrespective of appearance or strength or material or whatever it is, on and on. It just is so consistent that these people would be around him and be supported by him.

Q: How did he react to the deterioration of his own body? How did he deal with that? Was there anger?

Saff: You know, I was not around him enough—

Q: —at that time?

Saff: —to be able to respond to that, but I thought [he reacted] rather remarkably well, given how bad it was. Then again, you have to understand that—it's a cliché but he played the hand he was dealt. I mean, it was his fault that he fell. He was warned. He just played it. And I wasn't around to see or hear him complain about poor me, or it's difficult. When I was with him, to get him into a wheelchair—people helping him and all of that—he went out. He didn't complain. He had his withered arm. He might be a little frustrated and try and get the doctors to try and do something. But he just went with it. He just went with it. He was terribly afraid of dying and certainly would never talk about death early on. And in the end, I guess he wasn't afraid of dying. He was very fearful about death. He wanted to go on forever. He intended to go on forever.

Q: I understand that he had his hospital bed moved into the studio at the end.

Saff: Yes. Whether he did it, whether they did it for him—I think they did that for him at the very end.

Q: At the very end?

Saff: Yes. They brought him back into the studio at the very end. Put him in the studio. And in the end, he asked his friend who's a physician down there who was helping him understand the prognosis and whether he was ever going to get better. And by that time, whatever it is, the COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease] was horrific and the road back was, at that point, barred by the angel with a flaming sword. He was not going to get back. And it was at that point that he agreed to basically pull the plug and he made the decision. And the question was put to him, "Do you want to wait for Christopher [Rauschenberg] to come?" His son. As I understand it, he said no. And he made a decision to end it after making an inquiry about whether he was going to improve.

Q: His mom was a religious person. Did he ever exhibit any kind of spiritual inclinations?

Saff: Well, he was very informed about the Bible. He obviously had to study the Bible.

Q: As a kid, I think it was compulsory.

Saff: Yes. It was compulsory. And he knew that. He was not dissolute but I don't know whether he was an atheist. He could have been. I think his sensitivities veered towards Buddhism and anything related to Buddhism in terms of just hearing and discussing it. He certainly was not a religious person and he certainly was not a fan of anything necessarily religious. When he had a

chance to do that project for the Padre Pio [Pilgrimage Church, San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy]—do you know about that?

Robert Rauschenberg
The Happy Apocalypse [original artwork for Padre Pio Liturgical Hall], 1999
Inkjet pigment transfer, acrylic, and graphite on polylaminate
96 x 250 1/16 x 2 inches (243.8 x 635.2 x 5.1 cm)
The Menil Collection, Houston
Gift of the artist in memory of Walter Hopps

Q: No. Tell us about that.

Saff: Who was the architect? Renzo Piano.

Q: Piano.

Saff: So a number of artists were asked to make works and Roy did a drawing for the Last Supper, which was gorgeous, but no faces. It was just great. And that was going to go into the chapel and Bob did what was going to be a huge curtain. It must have been for an arch, so it's a rounded top. He did a gorgeous drawing for it. In the center, he put a symbol for God, which was a microwave dish. It's a big image of a microwave dish in the middle of this net. Whoever the

clergy was that was involved with the commission wanted an explanation. Bob wrote something about what it was all about and they did not accept the reasoning. They wanted him to change it or they would not use it. And of course—

Q: A gun to the head. It doesn't work.

Saff: He wouldn't change anything. Of course, as usual, in the end that piece sold for more than he ever would have gotten had he sold it to the church. But to Bob, God could have been a microwave dish.

Q: So this was for Padre Pio for—

Saff: Renzo Piano, right.

Q: He also, I understand, apart from his marvelous teeth and everything else, was a natty dresser—

Saff: Yes.

Q: —and that was part of his environment as well.

Saff: Ah, yes. Everything was designed perfectly. His dress—he loved shopping for clothes. He did like that. It was a thing to do with whoever the friend was at the time. They'd go out

shopping for clothes and would dress beautifully. And of course, his selection of ties and the colors, it was all of a piece. He didn't drop the ball anywhere. But again, he was his own best product—his environment and himself right down to how he dressed and how he looked.

Q: Had he any close relationships with any clothing designers?

Saff: He was a friend of Issey Miyake—liked him a lot. Loved going to Barneys [New York]. I don't know other people. I would not be surprised if he was friendly with a lot of other designers.

Q: So he passed away in Captiva in his studio. He was a heavy smoker too for a while, right?

Saff: Yes. But he had given up smoking for quite a while before.

Q: Right. So how had he acquired the COPD? Was that something that arrived later in life?

Saff: Yes. That all got packaged into everything going downhill from the time he started getting the TIAs. And I think it was a product of failure of various organs. I can't speak to that with any—

Q: It's respiratory failure.

Saff: I think as other things began to fail, that was a failure. I don't think that was a product of his smoking. He certainly looked after his health in other ways. He might be smoking and he

might be drinking like crazy, but I've never seen anybody take more vitamins than he did. He'd lay out tons of vitamins that he would be taking. He'd eat very cautiously. Food that he ate was always pretty much healthy. He didn't eat junk.

Q: Spicy though. I understood he liked—

Saff: Very spicy, yes. Spicy, tasty, whatever. Spicy got us through ROCI. Listen, if it wasn't for spices and Tabasco sauce going everywhere, I don't think we would have survived some of these places. But yes, things were spicy. Really, the more I think about this guy, it's like, he's so remarkable. This man of the world—not just Citizen Rauschenberg but citizen of the world Rauschenberg. He had so many varied aspects—and you can dwell on all these aspects or some of these, and then you miss the whole point.

Q: So many different layers of complexity and seeming contradictions—the contrarian, the bully, the saint, the compassionate friend, the sybarite, the health-conscious careful eater. These were all contradictions.

Saff: I know. That's right. It's just everything is disparate. It's remarkable. And that's why everybody was always off-guard with him all the time. You're just off-guard. You never knew which way it was coming at you or coming from you. That was the great thing about being around him and the difficult thing about being around him.

Although, I've never heard anybody—of course, everybody is very loyal to a fault—it will be interesting in due course to hear stories. I guess you're going to interview a lot of people. You know, what people will say and whether people will have analyzed it or looked at it in terms of the totality. I have never heard or seen in writing any of this material.

Q: He was attracted, you say, to people who would be deemed flawed in some way in a conventional sense. Here's a guy who's a hunky, gorgeous guy in a conventional sense.

Saff: Right.

Q: The *GQ* model, movie star looks, who's attracted to people who are somehow defective or imperfect. And, I don't know—you go to sort of the Dorian Gray trope. It's like the two sides of the person—the person in the painting, the real person. Do you think maybe his acceptance of these people might have been in some way him trying to accept his own emotional deformity?

Saff: No. I think he's a person who was on a mission. He was on a mission to accept everybody and everything, to embrace everybody—to embrace them with acceptance, with love, with caring—however clumsy it may have been delivered.

Q: Even if he's screaming at them—

Saff: That's right.

Q: —one hour and then the next hour, hugging and kissing.

Saff: That's right. That's right.

Q: How do you think he imagined his legacy? Did he ever speak to you about how he wanted to be remembered or seen?

Saff: Couldn't do that because he couldn't talk about his mortality. Couldn't be a conversation.

Q: Yes. This came up in the Q&A about the catalogue raisonné. A lot of questions about how he categorized works that are multiples or editions that aren't actually multiples—that are singular pieces.

Saff: Variations. Unique variations.

Q: And too many variations within each genre to actually have the genre be useful the way it would be useful in a traditional, conventional catalogue raisonné. And David, I recall, also intimated that this was nothing to be discussed because it implied mortality.

Saff: Right. You couldn't gain traction on a conversation with that because it inevitably meant thinking about what happens in the future. He's a person who had issues of time—you could ask him about a date and he'd get very offended. If you asked him, "Well, what was that in 2000?" Whatever. "1950?" I don't know. He'd get very petulant about it. He didn't like to think in terms

of timelines that way. It's just that there's a kind of avoidance of specificity of the past or of the future that was there. I don't know why. The future, I understood. He just could not deal with planning for his absence.

Q: How did that shape the dynamic that existed between the two of you? Because you're a person who's very interested in the concept and the practice of timekeeping.

Saff: Well, he was interested in stories about timekeeping and what I was doing. It's not like Rosenquist who would say, "What the hell are you doing with all those clocks? It's nuts. Why are you wasting your time?" Bob would be interested. You could tell him about it because he was interested in everything. He didn't make a judgment about it. But I didn't always get along with Bob. And I am one of the few people who stormed off. I don't know about other people who stormed off. He did insult me—I told you about one circumstance and there were—

Q: Your chandelier. Your big print.

Saff: Yes. I didn't always walk off and I didn't say, "Fuck you," when he said, "That work is overworked," at my opening, at my show. And I didn't—he came to—I was getting an honorary doctorate. And Bob was being Bob—gives with one hand and takes away with the other. He came up to honor me. I was receiving this honorary doctorate and Rosenquist came down and [Richard] Anuszkiewicz was there and Tom Krens came down to give a speech. I had just finished the ceremony the night before Bob was on PBS on *American Masters* [note: "Robert Rauschenberg: Inventive Genius," directed by Karen Thomas, first aired April 7, 1999]. And it

started with interviewing me and sort of ended with interviewing me. Have you ever seen that piece?

Q: No. I'll get ahold of it.

SECTION CLOSED UNTIL 1/1/2019

Saff: Where was I going with this?

Q: Your honorary degree.

Saff: Yes. So the honorary degree. Take with one hand, give with the other. So we're sitting at a table, and that *American Masters* piece came out, and the son [Christopher Rauschenberg] who was very bright had said some really good stuff. He was very good, very good. I assume you're going to interview him.

Q: I hope so.

Saff: He's great. He'll be great. He was just really good.

Q: There's a long list and—

Saff: He'll be very good. Very intelligent and has a good handle on his father's work. Anyhow, Bob says to me—the honoree of the evening and this is my time—"Isn't my son great? You saw that thing? Isn't he great?" He didn't say anything about my contribution to it. That's fine. But he says, "Isn't my son great?" I said, "Actually, he was superb, Bob." Then Bob says, "Don't you wish your sons were capable of that?" It was just so ugly to say something like that. How ugly can you get, you know? How dare he? And it's one of those things I wish I would have said

to him at the time. But you're at a table, you're compromised, and he takes a cheap shot at you. Why couldn't you just let it go with, "Wasn't my son great?" He had to advance his son at the cost of my sons. It's so—

Q: Was it competitiveness or something?

Saff: Sure it is. Sure it is. He was competitive with everybody. He was competitive with everybody.

Q: One of the things that will be a legacy long after people really remember his being alive—when all of us are in the ground or wherever we'll be—is that he was always involved with philanthropy and helping people. We talked about Change yesterday. And David spoke about how he and Bradley would look at slides and write checks, that that was a real commitment that he had to helping artists. What did he ever share with you about his reasons for wanting to be involved with any one of a number of causes? You spoke a while ago about Sharon Stone and sponsoring—

Saff: Women's shelters [Abuse Counseling and Treatment (ACT)].

Q: Women's shelter. Where was that?

Saff: Fort Myers.

Q: In Fort Myers. What was the mission of the shelter?

Saff: To hide women who are being abused.

Q: Oh, abused women?

Saff: Yes.

Q: Not like unwed mothers but—

Saff: Abused women.

Q: Victims of domestic abuse. How did he get involved in that?

Saff: I think through his boyfriend, through Darryl. I think Darryl's sister was involved with the shelter. I think he might have got involved with that through Darryl.

Q: And so Sharon Stone got involved with a benefit?

Saff: Sharon Stone came down with a benefit for a fundraiser [Arts for ACT, 1999 and 2005]. She'd sit on your lap for a thousand dollars or something like that—literally, she did. Yes. See there's a whole range of activities that I was not a party to.

Q: So he knew a lot of people in the world of celebrity. Rock stars, movie stars. And they would be arriving and leaving at his home in Captiva.

Saff: Yes. There were the occasional—

Q: What they used to call the jet set.

Saff: Yes. But not like a Warhol kind. It wasn't like that. The occasions were more rare.

Q: You spoke of David Byrne, Sharon Stone. Who else? Mick Jagger, Jerry Hall.

Saff: It just goes on. The queen of Sweden [Princess Christina]. It just goes on and on. So many different people. But it wasn't that he entertained all the time and that these people were coming through all the time. There were rare occasions. Ted Koppel, whatever. People would be coming through to see him.

Rauschenberg and David Byrne at a Talking Heads concert, New York, 1983. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Terry Van Brunt

Q: What did he ever say about his commitment to philanthropy to you?

Saff: He never did. He never did. He just did it. He didn't talk about that kind of thing. Just the largesse was there. I don't know what the reasons are for his philanthropy. I don't know whether it's like those things where it just made him feel better about himself, whether he did everything for pure compassion. But the end result is what counts and I think the giving was very extensive and more than anybody realized and for really good causes. He was a very generous man—very generous.

Q: So the causes being like AIDS research, nature conservancy, artist relief, artist support.

Saff: Support of people that he knew that just needed help. Whether through Change or directly to someone he hears needs help. Even to help people with businesses, as I told you last time, or to help people get ahead. I think what happened is that eventually he got reined in slightly by accountants and by his assistant. As the accountants advised him he became more responsible with limited resources, so then instead of giving things, "Okay, I'm not going to give you that house. I'll give you a mortgage on that house." Bob would have paid for the house and given it to people if he thought they could use it.

His housekeeper in Captiva had one leg. A black guy, humble background. He had a job in perpetuity and again, actually, that's a case in point. Here's a guy who's having to make up many beds and clean and all. He did it all. Incredible. And Bob supported him and enabled him.

Q: What's his name?

Saff: Oh, god. Phillip [Woods].

Q: And how old a man was he or is he now?

Saff: Phillip's probably early sixties now. He was there for years and years. Of course, he hired him—a one-legged, African American guy from a humble background. And to keep up all of the properties down there. He worked hard and Bob loved him, took care of him, and probably helped his kids with school, and so forth. And he had a job in perpetuity.

Q: Is he there still?

Saff: No. All of these people for the most part were let go or they wanted out. Eventually they were all bought out.

Q: Golden parachutes.

Saff: I think they were given a month's salary for every year they were with Bob, as I understand it. And I think, as I understood it from some of them, they had a signed agreement that they would never write about Bob or discuss him publicly or privately.

Q: So to preserve the confidentiality of the domestic realm.

Saff: I can only tell you that based on what Lawrence told me that he was asked to sign. It had terms that controlled information about Bob. That's why I did have a go-around with the copyright on this information. I insisted that I be the copyright holder because in no way did I want anything that I said, or phrased, or anything like that—not that it's that important—but I didn't want to, in any way, be stopped by the Foundation from using any of my own material.

Q: Well, this is a matter to be explored, I think, with Columbia University.

Saff: It's all sorted out.

Q: Oh, it's all sorted out.

Saff: Oh, yes. It's all sorted out. They said, "Well, nobody ever raised that question before." I said, "Yes, well, I'm raising it now."

Q: No. It's a very interesting kind of question because, for instance, with the Smithsonian [Institution, Washington, D.C.], there is a document that each narrator has to sign that is consent in gift form, which can impose whatever kinds of restrictions they choose upon access in publication. In the case of Arne Glimcher, he imposed all restrictions because apparently he's working on a memoir. As did Steve Martin because he doesn't want people to know where he lives and you know, doesn't want public access. But scholars are welcome to listen to the

interview or to read the transcription. But yes. I think it's sort of astonishing that the question was not raised before.

Saff: Well, I had not looked at the agreement and wrote you while I was traveling saying I hadn't read the agreement and I wanted to make sure what it stated. I got home and looked at it and basically it says I was not allowed to use anything for commercial purposes. I could use it for non-commercial purposes. It's my information. And I could see the Foundation wanting that. Now, maybe that was a standard thing that Columbia did, but I know that the Foundation would want that. And there was no way that I would agree to do anything in which I wasn't the copyright holder, and I was happy to give a nonexclusive use without any limitation to the Foundation or to Columbia. But in terms of intellectual properties, I want the copyright to my own information and wording.

Q: Of course. All of this is in your own brain. This is not surrendering that to this enterprise. So you should be able to—it seems reasonable to me, but I'm just the interviewer.

Saff: Well, the fact is that the intellectual properties guy—who's a friend of mine—who I managed to have hired years ago, is now working for the Foundation. And he's the guy who drafted it to make sure that the Foundation and Columbia had the copyright. And when he heard that I had a problem with this, he called me. He said he was going to work it out. "Oh, what do you want? You want commercial use of it? I can work that out for you, Don." I said, "Let me ask you a question, Joshua [J. Kaufman]. If you were representing me as you once did, is this the

way you would handle intellectual property? Would you not want me to hold a copyright?"

"Well, yes."

Q: What would Bob Rauschenberg have done?

Saff: What would Bob Rauschenberg have done? He wouldn't have given up a thing. He wouldn't have had this interview until that was sorted out. I said I'd go ahead with it, but they sorted it out before this thing happened.

Q: Oh, good.

Saff: It was all sorted out and signed by Columbia and by the Foundation hours before we met.

Q: Well, in any event, I would assume that the agreement would pertain to this recording specifically.

Saff: Right.

Q: Not to what's in your head, what's in your memory.

Saff: No. It has to do with the wording—

Q: The specific—

Saff: Now that I think about it, none of it was—it's not worthy of the effort in terms of the copyright issue. But it's appropriate that I have the copyright to my own words and the way that I am read. Because I didn't have the copyright, I'd have to ask permission to use my own phrasing. I can rephrase it. It's my ideas.

Q: You can ask yourself permission to use it.

Saff: Anyhow.

Q: Well, I'm new to Columbia so a lot of this is new to me. But like I said, my job is just conducting a conversation.

Saff: I know that, and apparently nobody has raised this question before, and I did. But you know, I did a lot of this for Bob. There are a lot of issues. Bob co-opted a photograph. I forget who it was by [Morton Beebe] but it was a major lawsuit, and it came up again. It was a photo of a diver that he used in a work. Are you familiar with that? Yes, and it's really strange to hear that he, of all people, would co-opt another artist's work. Bob is the last one in the world who would do that, the protector of everybody else. And so it's like one of these things in the gazillions of things he did—he inadvertently took something and instead of it being part of something else, which would have been okay, it was front and center and not in the context of enough material so that it wasn't a copyright issue. And it became a legal issue and, of course, they settled it eventually by giving the guy, the photographer, a number of works. But they agreed not to use

the photograph any further and that it wasn't used in any other work. While I was working with Bob, it turned out that it was used in another work—Bob forgot about it—in a painting. And that came up and the photographer saw it and I had to negotiate my way through that one with him giving him another work of art in order for him to sign off on it. That was the critical point at which Bob—

Q: But profitable for the photographer.

Saff: Not great. But he was doing the right thing—his work was taken from him—

Q: His work. Yes.

Saff: —in all of its glory, a beautiful photograph. It was at that point with all of this that Bob stopped using photographs from the media and only began using his own photography. And on any number of occasions, I tried to speak to him about that after a while because he was so burdened by, I guess, his own personal embarrassment. Nobody knew about it. Just Bob knew about it. But his own embarrassment by it that—he never went back to using photography from the media and that really significantly altered his work. The kind of topical information he could get through the media that he thrives on he precluded from himself because of this situation. And I went to attorneys and all that and I tried to go to him gently and say, "You could go back and you can begin to use this material again." And he never would. Everything from that point on, to my knowledge, came out of his own photography.

Q: And I understand that after his strokes, he would ask people if they were traveling, or whatever, to send him images.

Saff: Yes. That happened a few times even early after the stroke and even slightly before that. Occasionally, he needed images, but they were never acceptable to him for the most part. You see? Because they were obviously Rauschenbergs. I did some of that. I've taken a picture. He sent me to the Seaquarium somewhere in Miami, whatever. He needed pictures. Well, the pictures that I took would be the kinds of things you would think would be a Rauschenberg. I knew what Bob wanted just like I knew what he was going to select and I was never right. I took photographs that you'd think would be a natural Rauschenberg, and the problem was that they were a Rauschenberg—so they weren't acceptable to him. So these things were basically useless as far as I—

Q: So he wanted to be surprised. He wanted you to challenge him in some way.

Saff: Right. And instead, you would give him what you think he needs, but what he needs is not what you think he needs. He needs what you don't anticipate him needing.

Q: He wants, perhaps, you to come to him with something that's contrary to what you think he needs.

Saff: That's right.

Q: To challenge him with that.

Saff: And good luck trying to think that up. If you have enough nerve to do it and how do you go about doing it? The people that surrounded him were not in the league of creativity that he was. And so you couldn't very easily supply him with what his needs were. I don't know whether people were able to give him what he needed. I know that that went on. I don't know that he ever used any of it. Do you know whether he used any of it?

Q: I have no clue. That would be a question for people who were actually in the studio and around him in the last years.

Saff: Maybe that's a question for Lawrence or for Laury Getford, those people. They would have a lot of answers for that.

Q: What do you think was his most influential body of work?

Saff: His most influential body of work? As of today?

Q: What is his most influential body of work?

Saff: I think the Combines, clearly.

Q: Combines. What did he think was his most important body of work?

Saff: Well, it's the old cliché. It was obviously the next work he was going to do. It's the old Picasso cliché. He liked what he would do next. He certainly didn't think that the Combines were any more important than the *Runts* [2006–08] or those transfer things that he did so many of. And while they were creatively or design-wise sort of innovative, they did begin to get repetitive. They did start losing their experimentation and their, I don't know—sort of lack of flexibility or immediacy in what they were all about.

Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (*Runt*), 2008
Inkjet pigment transfer on polylaminate
61 x 73 1/2 inches (154.9 x 186.7 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: He was, anyway, allergic to repetition, right?

Saff: That's what he said. He said if he thought he was doing something he did before, he would change directions. And I suppose one would have to go back and revisit the work. I've had many of these conversations, and in my mind, the work gets diminished because I remember the repetitions and think that he compromised himself. Then I get in front of the work in a show and

I'm always surprised again by how fresh and how energetic and how lively everything looks. So it's a real peculiar situation that I have in terms of my liaison with the work, which is the numbers of works. The perception in my mind's eye is different than what I experience when I actually stand in front of the work. I'm always amazed when I go to an exhibition of his about the breadth of approach that he's taken and the creativity inherent in those approaches. You always walk away feeling like you're ennobled when you're at an exhibition of his.

Q: I hardly have to ask at this point, but he didn't ever speak openly with you about his own vision or estimation of the impact he had had on the practice of art making in an intellectual way?

Saff: No. He listened. He did listen with great interest. If you told him what the impact of his work was in China, he listened. He wouldn't give anything more than listen. It's like, "I'm glad. I'm happy. I'm happy to have made that contribution. They were ready for it." There was no reaction. No reaction.

Q: "They were ready for it," or, "They asked for it," or whatever.

Saff: He said nothing. Right. Nothing. Everything was, "If that's what you're telling me, the situation is 'before Rauschenberg—after Rauschenberg' in China, then that's what it is."

Q: They speak about certain lives that defy the picklocks of biography, and in a way, his life seems to be one such. But how do you imagine or how did he ever reveal how he saw himself? What was his image of himself?

Saff: You know, I think he had a big problem with himself. I think he saw himself as damaged goods in a way. Between the so-called dyslexia, then the broken relationships—personally, I think he had a big problem. I think that was a cause for him to lash out. I think these things built up in him. I think, basically, he didn't suffer from angst in terms of the work, but I think he personally suffered from a great deal of angst. I think you'd have to be a psychiatrist to know all the reasons why. I do think he had a deep problem with his father. I do think he had a significant problem with his education and his upbringing in Texas, and his homosexuality, and his relationship to clients, and to people who were getting rich off of him, which he deeply resented. The Robert [C.] Sculls of this world really, really got to him. I don't think he was a particularly happy person in spite of the fact that the work is always upbeat and it was positive. That became the alter ego. That's where he could be happy. That's where he could celebrate. And I think it made him happy to give. It made him feel better. It made him feel better. He felt better about himself by giving.

Q: Well, the generosity is remarkable. Learning about the man's life, talking to a variety of people who knew him, who worked with him—the complexity, the contradictions. At the end of the day, perhaps the legacy would be his generosity.

Saff: Would not be?

Q: Would be his generosity.

Saff: Yes. All of this conversation really, in the end, is irrelevant to the legacy. It's interesting to know what this guy was all about and how we ticked or how you think he ticked. But the end result is the body of work that is there and its strength is great. The generosity and efforts, publicly and privately, are enormous. It just whitewashes everything else. You accept the frailties. Because it's a small price to pay for the great gift he gave.

Q: Well put. At the beginning of this conversation, you compared him in a way to Charles Foster Kane, a fictional character—a man who no one in hindsight would ever fully understand. But unlike Kane, who built a monument to himself, Rauschenberg seems to have built a monument to the future.

Saff: Yes. And to the world through his celebration of the world through his art. That's a big Rosebud.

Q: That's a perfect ending. Thank you for your time.

Saff: It's great being with you guys.

Q: It's a pleasure. You're very generous with your time and your energy, and I thank you.

Saff: Yes. It's a strange thing, you know? I really did love Bob. I couldn't stand him.

Q: There are a lot of marriages like that. On that happy note—

[END OF INTERVIEW]