

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Asha and Suhrid Sarabhai

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Asha Sarabhai conducted by Cameron Vanderscoff and Gina Guy on March 18, 2015; with Asha and Suhrid Sarabhai conducted by Vanderscoff on November 18, 2015 and November 21, 2016; and a postscript with Manu Dantani, a Gujarati speaker, conducted by Vanderscoff with Asha and Suhrid Sarabhai translating on November 22, 2016. These interviews are part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

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

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Asha Sarabhai

Location: New York, New York

Interviewers: Cameron Vanderscoff (Q),
Gina Guy (Q2)

Date: March 18, 2015

Sarabhai: As I said, it feels like the dentist, but there we go.

[Laughter]

Q: Well, we'll try to make it slightly more pleasant.

Sarabhai: No, no, I'm just kidding.

Q: Okay. So today is Wednesday, March 18, 2015, and this is Cameron Vanderscoff here with Asha Sarabhai to talk about Robert Rauschenberg's visit to India in May and June of 1975.

Sarabhai: '75, that's right.

Q: But the approach that has been taken in this project has been to start with a little bit of a life history, just so we know a little bit about who's in the room, where they come from, and their own context prior to meeting Rauschenberg. So if you could just start us off, just stating for the record when and where you were born, a little bit about your childhood.

Sarabhai: Well, I was born in post-independent India in 1949. My father had moved across from what became Pakistan, from Karachi to India at the time because he didn't feel comfortable staying on once he was told, as a Hindu, that he would always be a second-class citizen. He was a lawyer and advocate in Karachi. So he decided to leave, move to Delhi, and join the [Indian] Foreign Service. So when I was nine months, we began traveling. We were all over the place. We lived in Prague and Paris, in Rome, Egypt. So the only time that I ever really lived in India for any length of time was after I got married. From where my father was in Romania, I went to university in England at that point in 1967, then got married in 1968. [Narrator note: Sarabhai interrupted her studies for several years after marriage and returned to University of Cambridge, England, to finish her degree from 1972 to 1974.] That was when I began living in Ahmedabad [India], which is where Bob came when I was about twenty-six.

Q: I'd like to talk about your move there and your marriage a little bit. But first, given that you had this very international upbringing, I'm curious what sort of role, if any, exposure to art played in it.

Sarabhai: The usual kind. I used to, if we were in France—when I was older, when I went on my own as well, I would go to the museums and stand in front of paintings. It was something I enjoyed greatly, but I had probably very little exposure to contemporary art at that point. It was more [Edgar] Degas and the Impressionists probably, as much as anything were part of one's visual framework. And in Romania my father had a few friends who were artists and sculptors and people. So we saw a fair amount there, which had elements of [Constantin] Brancusi and

things which were emerging in the work they were doing at that time. But that was a really difficult sort of [Nicolae] Ceaușescu period, so it was all quite tight and contained.

Also, in Cambridge there was a wonderful place which still exists called Kettle's Yard, where a man who was called [Harold Stanley] Jim Ede—who was the curator of the Tate [Gallery, London] and then left and set up his own thing, and who was really one of the people who discovered both [Henri] Gaudier-Brzeska's work and began acquiring Brancusi work for the Tate. He's dead now, but he had a beautiful place called Kettle's Yard where they have contemporary—have you heard of it?

Q2: Yes.

Sarabhai: It's really wonderful, yes.

Q2: There was an exhibition in the 2000s of Bob's work there. [Note: *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933–57*, 2006]

Sarabhai: Oh right, yes. So there was that exposure. But it wasn't something that I necessarily thought of as something I would be involved in or living with, as it turned out to some degree once my brother-in-law began inviting people to come to India. Bob was really the first person. So I think that really started something. [Alexander] Calder had been much earlier too, staying with my husband's [Suhrid Sarabhai] uncle's family, and did some work there because the [Sarabhai] family had also spent some time in New York. Another aunt of Suhrid's [Geeta

Sarabhai Mayor] had actually learnt about Western music in a kind of exchange. She was [learning Indian classical music and had decided to go to New York] to go to the Juilliard [School]. And [Isamu] Noguchi actually said to her, “You’re crazy. What do you want to go to the Juilliard for?” So he put her in touch with John Cage. He said, “If you’ll teach me about Indian music, I’ll teach you about Western music.” So that’s how that came about.

Q: This was the late forties or something like that?

Sarabhai: This was the late forties, yes, around '49, around the time I was born. [Laughs]

Q: So the roots of this predate you in that sense, this connection?

Sarabhai: Yes, absolutely.

Q: The family with this New York tradition of John Cage and that whole—

Sarabhai: That’s right. And another aunt of Suhrid’s [Gira “Giraben” Sarabhai], actually, apprenticed. She’s a very fine architect, but very much on her own terms. She never did any sort of so-called school-type training. But she went to Frank Lloyd Wright and asked if she could apprentice with him. He said, “Okay, we’ll give it a go,” which he did. So it was really that kind of non-formal, but very much a hands-on experience, which they had which was great.

Q: Now, something that I'd like to discuss at least a little bit in this interview is your own relationship with textiles. We just had a brief conversation prior to turning on the recorder and I know that you've worked a lot with textiles.

Sarabhai: That's right, yes.

Q: But before we come into that moment in May, June of 1975, I'm curious about what you then studied at Cambridge and just a little bit about that period of your life immediately prior—

Sarabhai: To Bob's visit?

Q: Exactly.

Sarabhai: The first—I did part one in Cambridge in French and German, and then I went on to do social and political sciences as my part two. That's what I got my degree in, in social and political science. It was nothing to do with textiles [laughs] because I really wanted to work in India and I wanted to try and set up some kind of cooperative thing to do it, which never quite emerged in that form. But it did emerge in other forms.

Q: A cooperative around—

Sarabhai: Around textiles because Ahmedabad was really—it was a big textile center at one point and that was where [Mohandas K. "Gandhiji"] Gandhi's movement emerged. That was

very much a cooperative kind of basis to it with the trade unions. [Narrator note: The early trade union movements, strikes, and attempts at resolving these issues through cooperation were a key precursor to the freedom movement. Gandhi was an important mediator in these movements.]

Ahmedabad used to be called the Manchester of India because it was actually mill textiles that they began making. But there was a whole other side, which was the handspun fabrics which was right through India. [Narrator note: The handspun Khadi movement was a part of Gandhi's movement for Swaraj (self-rule), one that he linked closely to questions of personal freedoms and self-dependence. He advocated the practice of hand spinning both as a symbolic act and as a material one.] Gandhi really began his main thrust for independence from Ahmedabad, which is where he also started the Salt March from, the Dandi March. It was a very resonant place with all these things, so one thought there are all kinds of things that one can try and do.

So then I started working initially with just one master craftsman who was a real genius in stitching techniques and gradually then got into having—at one point, we had about one hundred craftspeople working on textiles. Sadly at that point—trying to work with both the best of fabrics and the best of skills—in India, at that moment in time, there was really not any recognition for it or any sort of market. People kept trying to say, “Well, why didn't you downgrade it and make it cheaper?” And one would keep saying, “But, that's not the point of doing it; it's really to set a benchmark of what is possible.” But gradually it worked. Initially, we actually began exporting things. Then it ended up in—I think it must have been 1993—we actually started a small shop in London called Egg in partnership with someone. Actually Bob was very sweet at that point because he agreed to wear some of the clothes and be photographed for it, which was terrific. He

said, “Sure, if you want me to do it.” I’m very bad on any of the PR stuff, but the person we were in partnership with said, “Why don’t you ask him?” [Laughs] And he did, which is great.



Rauschenberg modeling original designs by Asha Sarabhai. *Independent* (London), January 27, 1994.

My textile involvement was over the years trying to find really sound, good fabrics that were woven as they should be. Initially, it was very little embellishment. And then it was how you could work any embellishment into the actual structure of the fabric. So that was basically what we did.

Q: Sure. Before we turned on the record, you were saying a little bit more about the textiles of this region, about the tradition. And as a way of thinking about the materials of this area, which are going to be one of the topics of this conversation, would you mind repeating or re-encapsulating some of that?

Sarabhai: The Khadi shops, which is where we went with Bob, where he bought the fabrics, many of which appeared in *Jammers* [1975–76], were shops that came about post-independence, after Gandhi had died. But Gandhi was very instrumental in making the whole Khadi movement a kind of nationwide practice, because he really believed that hand-spinning and hand-weaving were the backbone of India. Because in India, the amount of fabric that people actually use because of wearing saris, which are anything from five meters to nine—eight-and-a-half or nine— depending on the way they're worn. Men used to wear dhotis. In fact, there's a photograph of Bob in a dhoti.



Robert Rauschenberg
Charlie (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric and rattan poles
98 1/2 x 81 1/2 x 21 inches (250.2 x 207 x 53.3 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Rauschenberg wearing dhoti,
Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph
Collection. Robert Rauschenberg
Foundation Archives, New York.
Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 1975

Q2: Yes.

Sarabhai: So women used to wear saris and men used to wear dhotis and it was really a tradition of the unstitched garment in India. And Gandhi felt that was something that people used in their lives as a—I'm putting it this way, but it was the first architecture that surrounded you. So he felt that it should really be something you were involved in and that was handspun, handwoven. It was also, actually, a direct snub to the British because they were importing into India huge amounts of fabric from Manchester and places and killing the local manufacturing, which they did over the time that they colonized India. This was really to try and say, "No, we need to go the other way and symbolically just make and use and wear this fabric." Which he did when he went to London—even in the freezing cold, when Gandhi went, he actually went in a loin cloth and a shawl around him. He was called, I think, by [Winston Leonard Spencer] Churchill—he was called "the naked fakir." You know, what is he coming to visit the queen like this for?

So it was a very powerful symbol and it was very nice that Bob used some of that fabric in what he did. It was really as though—which I think he did, anyway, but it was just going back to what you could get your hands into or onto with the mud works. There was a very—I was going to say primitive in the best sense—engagement with basics rather than with things that just happened to be there. It was really looking and feeling and touching and understanding, which, I think, was what it was about.

Q: So we'll go deeper into that moment of encounter between Robert Rauschenberg and all these different materials in a moment. But, just briefly, I'd like you to chart how you came to be in this location, meeting your husband. So I know this is a large project, but just understanding how you came to be in that household.

Sarabhai: When I was at Cambridge, a sitar player was playing at a concert organized by the India Society. It was Vilayat Khan—there had been two concerts, including one where Ali Akbar Khan played the sarod—and at the particular concert when Vilayat Khan was playing the sitar, I was sitting next to two people who I knew, but not very well. The person next to me leaned across and said, “You’re clearly loving this.” I said, “Yes, it’s fantastic.” Because of the travel we’d always heard Indian classical music, but more on recordings. My father used to put it on in the mornings when we were children. And we’d say, “What is that stuff?” [Laughs] But because it was, in a sense, in our background, when I began hearing it, it really worked. I didn’t feel any distance from it. So Vilayat and Ali Akbar Khan were probably the two first people I heard actually in concert, in person.

So Kartikeya [Sarabhai], who happened to be Suhrid’s cousin, was sitting next to me, said, “By the way, Vilayat Khan is going to play at our wedding in July. So why don’t you come to it if you like it?” Actually I had no idea where Ahmedabad was. I was going home to Delhi, which is where my parents were at that point for the summer holidays. So I said, “Yes, sure. Why not?” [laughs] and left it at that.

Then we had—god, it’s strange— We had an American friend called Alan who was visiting India and who had been to stay with Suhrid’s cousin just about ten days before their wedding. He then came on to stay with us in Delhi. And Alan said, “Kartikeya and Rajshree are expecting you at their wedding.” So I said, “That’s great.” He said, “No, they really are,” and he brought an invitation with him. My mother, at that point, said, “Absolutely not. Young girls your age don’t

go halfway across the country to attend strangers' weddings." I said, "They're not strangers. They're at Cambridge with me." I think she had to deal with five girls who were all completely rebellious. [Laughs] And this is talking about 1968, which doesn't seem that long ago in American terms, but in terms of India, there was still this very conservative attitude as well as a very liberal attitude towards women. So I said, "But I've been at Cambridge. You've allowed me to do that, so why can't I go?" Then my father said, "Come on [Umadevi] Uma, she can go." After some tussling backwards and forwards we went to the airport and literally got a ticket at the last minute. [Laughs] So that's how I came to be there. If I hadn't gone, I would have had a completely different life, which might not have been bad either. [Laughs] So I think— That's sometimes what I think. But there it is.

So I went to Kartikeya's wedding. It's bizarre actually, because Kartikeya and Rajshree had asked Suhrid, they said, "We've got these different guests coming and would you have space for someone to stay?" Suhrid can be quite anti-social when he wants to be. So he said, "No, no, no. We don't have any space." But then I arrived there in the evening and the concert was that evening. What I'm told later—I don't know if it's true or not—but apparently Suhrid then went up to Kartikeya and said, "Actually, we do have some space if you want." So that was the beginning of the end. [Laughter] But if you really want to know, that's how it happened.

So then he used to arrive in Delhi—my husband—with these bouquets of tuberose. My brother, who was all of eight, said, "Who does he think he is? What is he doing?" Because I was very close to my brother and he really didn't like the thought of anyone intervening in the family. So anyway, we got married soon after that, which is actually why I then took a break from

Cambridge and then had our eldest son [Sanjay Sarabhai], who sadly isn't there anymore. And then I went back to Cambridge in '72 and finished my degree in social and political science in '74, May. Our second son, Samir [Sarabhai], who you met, was born in August of that month. So I did my degree with being hugely expectant, as they say. But it was wonderful actually. It worked out really well. And then Bob came in '75, when Samir was really a tiny little one.

Q: So how much did you know about the Sarabhai family, because they have this long history, of course, in this region, a very proud family with the textile—

Sarabhai: To be honest, very little. I knew that Suhrid's aunt, Mridula [Sarabhai], and his great-aunt, his grandfather's sister, Mridulaben [Sarabhai], had both been involved with—the great aunt had been involved with the [Ahmedabad] Textile Labor Association and with setting up a union which actually confronted her brother. So it was an interesting moment in time when she led the labor union against her brother who had a mill, the Calico Mills [Ahmedabad]. So there were these two very disparate elements, in a sense, but they managed to work it out in an amicable, peaceful coexistence kind of format. So I knew about her and I knew about his aunt's work—after I met him, I found out more about it—in Kashmir, trying to get [Jawaharlal] Nehru to be honorable about having promised a plebiscite there. That part really sort of fired my imagination and I just thought it was something where perhaps there are all sorts of things that need doing. Maybe one could be involved in doing things there.

But I'd never really thought about the textile part at all at that point. When we actually decided to get married, I actually hadn't seen the Calico Museum of Textiles [Ahmedabad] at that point

at all, which is an incredible resource. So it was all quite quick and quite sudden. And then you're plunged into it. But no, I didn't know very much at all. I certainly didn't know anything about the art part or any of that. But I suppose what I did know or feel was that you could communicate. There wasn't a barrier that you felt at home in terms of the languages and conversations that you were able to have. Having lived away from India so much, that felt right.

Q: There was a broader range of conversations or more where you—

Sarabhai: There were broader ranges of conversations. Again there was right from the beginning a bit of a problem because a lot of them were in Gujarati, a lot of the conversations, and I didn't speak Gujarati. So that was slightly problematic too. I learned to pick it up relatively fast, but not in any—I still can't have a really highfalutin conversation, to my shame. But it's true—I can't. I think that's just what my childhood was; it was not in an Indian language because we were traveling the whole time. And it is a disadvantage, but at the same time that's who I happen to be.

Q: So that was the predominant language spoken in the house, not Hindi?

Sarabhai: No, Gujarati, because each region has its own language. Hindi wasn't the language. I was much more conversant in Hindi than in Gujarati.

[Laughter]

Q: So then, if you think about May 1975, how long had you been in this household at that time?

Sarabhai: We got married in December '68, so six years. Our youngest son was, as I said—I think he was about nine months. He was born in August '74. So we would be sitting in the garden and he would be about that high, and Bob would have his Jack Daniel's. He'd say, "Here." So I said, "What are you doing?" [Laughs] He'd say, "It won't do him any harm." I don't think it's done any harm, but who knows?

[Laughter]

Q: So to go deeper into that visit, he arrives, I believe it's May 23. So then what do you remember prior to that? Because I know that he had been there in 1964—

Sarabhai: That's right.

Q: —with John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

Sarabhai: Yes, which I didn't know anything about.

Q: But those were prior.

Sarabhai: As I remember what happened was that Anand [Sarabhai], Suhrud's brother, got a phone call late one night from Bob saying, "We were supposed to be going to China, but I don't

want to go to China,” because he was coming with Gemini [G.E.L., Los Angeles], with Sidney [B.] Felsen and people. He said, “I don’t want to go to China. So is it all right if we come to Ahmedabad?” Anand said, “Yes, sure, but it’s May. It’s very hot.” So he said, “The heat doesn’t bother me. So can we come?” I think the next morning Anand must have mentioned it to all of us. We had our own separate home, but we used to have lunch or dinner, many meals in common. So I think Anand said to us that this rather large group of people was planning to come. Everyone said, “Yes, fine.” Actually that was really how it happened. It was only when they suddenly arrived that you realized that your life was going to be turned upside down for a bit. [Laughs] But it was great. It was really great.

Q: So was it typical for the family—

Sarabhai: No, it was really the first time. In the case of Anand and Suhrud and [Manorama] Mani [Sarabhai] and myself, it was really the first time that we were actually hosting some— John Cage and David Tudor and Merce Cunningham had all been and were good friends of Mani’s and used to love— The whole food thing was a very important connection because my mother-in-law was passionate about food and knew everything about Indian food. So there was a big exchange there in terms of culinary, but she also was an incredibly cordial and generous and very powerful kind of woman. She knew how to get her own way, but she was good fun as well. I think that worked for when John and Merce and David—and she and David Tudor were good friends. We hadn’t known about this until much later, when, not so long ago, someone sent me a piece that Alexander Keefe had written [“Subcontinental Synth: David Tudor and the First Moog in India,” eastofborneo.org, 2013]. Have you seen that?

Q2: He's done a lot of research in India.

Sarabhai: That's right and he was also interested in looking at the work that Suhrid's uncle, Vikram [A. Sarabhai], had done with the space research.

Q: Atomic Energy Commission.

Sarabhai: That's right. So he'd been looking at some of that.

Q2: So had Bob actually met the family in '64 or how did he know—?

Sarabhai: You know, Gina, he must have done. I don't know. Because he knew Gira [Sarabhai] and he knew Gautam [Sarabhai]. I think that must have also been because they came a lot to New York. Gautam and Kamalini [Sarabhai]'s daughters studied in the [United] States. One of them, Mana [Sarabhai], was at NYU [New York University] and Shyama [Sarabhai] was at Sarah Lawrence [College, Bronxville, New York]. So I think they had probably met up when they were in New York as well. There was a connection that kept going.

Then Anand, my brother-in-law, and his partner at that time, Hildegard Lamfrom, used to— Anand had worked with [James D.] Watson and [Francis Harry Compton] Crick on the double helix thing when he was at Cambridge. He and Hildegard then moved to Portland, Oregon, where they were at a lab there for some time and then later moved on to the Salk [Institute for

Biological Studies, La Jolla, California]. Anand used to be in New York, I think, on and off, so he probably had looked. That part, actually, is a complete—I really don't know, prior to 1975, what contact Anand had with Bob. But he must have done because—

Q: There's a little bit of correspondence prior to '75 with them, with Hildegard.

Sarabhai: But it was only really when everyone came there that I then—it was just one of those sort of strange—from my point of view, it certainly felt like a really strong affinity. We would all have dinner around the table. Then everyone else would melt away to their— And Bob and I would sit, talking until very late at night. My mother-in-law disapproved of it. [Laughs] I don't know quite why, but she did. And so every so often I would get this sort of disapproving thing, “Oh, how come you were up so late.” But it was just wonderful because they were very meandering—they digressed everywhere, the conversations.

But I think for me—I was probably twenty-six or twenty-seven and it really was an encouragement too because we used to talk of all kinds of things. It wasn't easy in many ways for me, fitting in there. But that aside, I would talk about things I wanted to do. Then I'd say, “But sometimes everyone seems to find that too worrisome.” Bob—I always have remembered, whenever I feel troubled by something—he would say, “Asha, what are we here for but to disturb the world?” At that point, it was transgressive in the best sense. It wasn't just to be—it wasn't just about rebelling for the sake of it. But he was basically saying if you feel something strongly, hold out for it. And I think that, for me, was a great support right through the years of knowing him. Even if one wasn't necessarily directly in touch for long periods of time, it was

just this feeling that he was there. It was really extraordinary, actually, because it—I've not had that with many people, where I know there's somebody who'll back you very strongly, both emotionally and intellectually as well. And that emerged very soon in this stage, just through these conversations that—

Q: So I'm curious, you said he shows up in your life and turns things upside down. We also talked about—you had some exposure to the Impressionists and things like that. But the name Robert Rauschenberg and the fact that this Robert Rauschenberg person and this whole ensemble was coming around, I'm curious to what, if anything, did you know about who this might be, what your expectations were.

Sarabhai: I had no idea. I was, at that point, very immersed, both because I had two young children—two young boys who were quite a handful—and I suppose I was just at the beginning of trying to work with this master craftsman on the textile thing myself. Again, being perfectly honest, Anand, my brother-in-law, was not a tremendously open person in terms—he was an incredible mind in terms of going all sorts of places and wonderful ideas. I think he was a real—in many ways he was a real alchemist in a lot of the projects that emerged from it because he would think of all sorts of ideas. But he was quite possessive in a strange way of things around him and people around him. I think he would sometimes feel that I was causing too much digression by conversations. It was quite interesting for me to have to find out that I couldn't just sort of be there and intervene. There again Bob was actually fantastic because he said, "I want you to be here." So it was really, for me, that moment in time was actually learning more about my in-laws in a way, which was quite interesting.

Q: Can you say a little more of what you learned about them through—

Sarabhai: I learned that—and this is really personal history— [Laughs] But I think that Anand and Suhrud and Mani, his mother, they'd from early on lived very much as a triangle because their father died very young. And so in an odd kind of way, you were allowed in, but you weren't quite allowed in. That, to me, was quite a surprise because— And I don't think it's a Western thing at all. But I think, to me, if you got married, you were starting a new sort of unit, a new way of living. But here it was very much you were expected to fit in. If you didn't, then you were in trouble. [Laughs] If you made trouble, then you were in even more trouble. [Narrator note: I learned that this was about the family, which actually was this triumvirate/triad, and that you were only to be assigned/allowed a minor role as assenter.]

So there it is. I laugh about it now, but I think when you're younger and trying to—and probably also the language and many other things— It was as though you were supposed to be on this side of the fence and not the other and if you crisscrossed— I'm putting it badly, but I think it was a difficult thing for them to feel that you actually could have other loyalties and could develop other friendships, which were very powerful and strong in your life. You were supposed to represent the family and that was—

Q2: That was because of that specific family or was that partly the times as well?

Sarabhai: I think it was partly the time. I think it was part of that specific family also. I think it was a family of some renown and some sort of— It was certainly a family of importance within the city. And partly, I suppose, rightly or wrongly, I didn't necessarily feel— I felt I was marrying an individual, not a family. And so it took me a long time to realize. I found it quite oppressive at times, to be honest, because I think that cultures and things evolve through everyday interactions and they can't be fixed. Often if I would say something or try and do something differently, I would be told, "But that's not our culture." I'd say, "What do you mean, it's not your culture? Culture is something lived and that you evolve."

So that was one of the areas that individually, and for me personally, was problematic. But I'm one that survived it in the end. And it was also an incredible opportunity that one had not in any way thought about preemptively, but suddenly to have Bob there, [Robert] Bob Petersen, Christopher [Rauschenberg], and then Gianfranco [Gorgoni], [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi]— it was just like a wonderful breath of fresh air, to be honest, to be able to have these long conversations that meant a lot, which were about life rather than anything specific or art. Also during the day to be involved quite intensively with helping make some of the things or be there and doing stuff was wonderful. It was a great experience. I'm very grateful to Anand that he brought that into one's life. I had no pre-understanding or concept that Bob was this major artist. It was just a name really, at that point, which I'm very grateful for too.

Q: Sure. So if there was this somewhat insular kind of family dynamic, why do you think Anand invited Bob in the first place? Did he have an interest in this? What was this, bringing such an outside—

Sarabhai: No, Anand had a great interest. Anand was—as I say, there were two sides. He was an incredible mercurial kind of curious person and he was very interested in art. I think there was actually also a pragmatic part of it in his mind, which was that— Because he worked out a kind of exchange system where he would host people, but that there was something about the art being shared. I think, from his point of view, because he was interested in art, he also wanted to build up a collection in India. At that point there were very stringent foreign exchange regulations, so there was no way that he could have done it in any other way.

But also I think part of Anand was very much a scientist's scientist and the other part of him was—not that they're separate, but I think the other part was really an artist manqué in a sense. I think he would have always—because he had incredible ideas and wonderful sort of—he would try out all kinds of things. He was really a bright, wonderful person. But he could also be a very tyrannical person. He was a real—I suppose we're all a bit like that. Which was why, I think, he was thrilled probably when Bob rang and said, “Can we come there?” He must have probably mentioned it, I would imagine, to Bob on visits here, which is how it must have been in Bob's head somewhere that he could ring and decide to come.

Q: It's there in the correspondence as well.

Sarabhai: So I'm sure there must have been, yes. But I wasn't aware of any of that. Then subsequent to that, I think Anand actually made it a project where he then began actively inviting people rather than— In Bob's case, I think it was really what happened to happen because he

decided he didn't want to go to China. And I think he was going to work on paper in China as well, if I'm not mistaken.

Q2: In Japan.

Sarabhai: In Japan. But was there not a project, a China plan?

Q2: There was also a project in China, but Sid had been working for like a year on making arrangements for him to go to Japan and then about two months before they were supposed to go, Bob said, "I don't want to go. Let's go to India instead."

[Laughter]

Sarabhai: That's right. That's how I heard. The paper which was used in the work was rag-paper made at the Gandhi Ashram [at Sabarmati, Ahmedabad] in a very— It's a beautiful space even now. If any of you ever came to see, it is one of the most—I don't know how to describe it. But it's a very rhythmic, peaceful space in which they actually make the rag-paper and then hang it out to dry. I don't think they do it consciously—it's an old way of making paper—but I think when Gemini had it tested because they were worried about its longevity, I think they found that actually it had a perfect pH, whatever all the contents, the necessities are. They found that actually this paper had it. I don't know whether that's been true in conserving the work or whether you've had any problems, but—

Q2: I haven't heard of any problems with the paper. They've had some problems with the mud.

Sarabhai: Possibly with the bamboo staining—the split bamboo.

Q2: The bamboo we've had bug problems with, where we opened up something and it had been basically eaten away. But I haven't heard of any problems with the paper.

Sarabhai: No because the paper seems to stand up to years and years with very little problem, which is great. That's all made in one of the— It's one of the activities of the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad. That's where all the paper basically came from and where Bob did some of the work as well.

Q: So I'd like to go into the materials and the process. So he shows up. It's May. It's hot.

Sarabhai: And the first thing he said, which again has become apocryphal for everyone, was that, “We're here,”—it's made to all the people in his group—“and if anyone mentions the heat once, I'm putting them on the next plane back.” So everyone worked through really swelteringly hot days. And it's very dry heat so maybe that's easier to do, but really, really bone-dry heat and no air-conditioning in the spaces where he worked. It was out of the question. So it was hot, but no one mentioned it.

[Laughter]

Q: So I'm curious then about how he got started. Did he seem to have this whole vision? Was he sort of directing traffic left and right or how did this project organically form? Because I've seen these photographs where it seems there's not only his team, but you were working. A lot of people were involved in this so I'm curious if you could walk us through that ramp-up.



Robert and Christopher Rauschenberg, Asha Sarabhai, Suzanne Felsen, Pal Babu, Charles Ritt, Sidney Felsen, and Robert Petersen working on Rauschenberg's *Unions* series (1975), Sarabhai Retreat, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, www.gianfrancogorgoni.it

Sarabhai: Yes, to the degree I can. I know the paper part was what it began with. As far as I know, it was going to the Gandhi Ashram, seeing the paper process, and beginning to use that. And then there were lots of textiles as well, so it was going to the textile markets. Ahmedabad still has very busy second-hand fabric markets on the street, probably five days of the week if not more where people, poor people will go. It's an interesting exchange actually, because people will go around. Women will buy new—it sounds bizarre—they will buy new stainless steel utensils. Then they'll go from home to home and they'll exchange the utensils for second-hand clothes: saris, clothing, whatever. Then they'll go away. They'll sell those clothes in the second-hand market and it becomes a kind of real trade. As a result, people put together the most extraordinary combinations of print and plain. The fabrics, when you see them, you just think,

“Who needs people like Jean-Paul Gaultier?” Because these guys just put it together with a real flair and panache—I’m sure that was something that struck Bob as well because it’s a very powerful visual image. In spite of often really dire poverty, people still look extraordinary because they will combine— From very little, they will make a huge amount. There’s a real thing about necessity, but not at all de-linked from beauty. I think that that was something that Bob was really struck by.

It would come out in strange things that he would say because I used to wear these—because it was hot—these thin cotton saris which sometimes had a very simple edging in gold thread. You’d be walking through the mud in the garden because when they watered the garden to cool it down, there would be real muddy patches. He’d say, “You’re walking through the mud and the gold is trailing in it.” And I’d say, “Yes, but it’s okay.” We used to talk about concepts of what real luxury is about.

But I think the textile—I’m not sure what his involvement with textiles—I know there was the *Bed* [1955] and all that. But I think his response to the range of textiles in India was very powerful.



Robert Rauschenberg
Bed, 1955
Combine: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet,
mounted on wood support
75 1/4 x 31 1/2 x 8 inches (191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Leo Castelli in honor of Alfred H. Barr Jr.

Q: He's talked about this a little bit, that it opened him up to color and to the—

Sarabhai: Yes. I think there was a lot of— It was quite a strong impression, both from seeing these piles of second-hand fabrics, going to the Khadi shops, and then thinking of working them into the paper and sandwiching them into the paper in different ways. To be honest, how the mud thing emerged, I'm not sure, but I do know that there were all kinds of people who were called in who would say, "Okay, if you put tamarind seed powder and fenugreek seeds—" And I know that that's true because it is a binder; if you take fenugreek seeds and crush them, they hold together and they smell. [Laughs] They're what the British have always complained about in terms of, "Don't have Indians living next to you because they'll smell you out with their curry smells." But that fenugreek has a really strong smell. If you don't like it, you can—I don't particularly like it. [Laughs] But the other thing was tamarind seeds, which again strengthen. So there were all these kitchen herbs and spices that came into the making of the mud.

I think the mud thing—and I may stand to correction, but I think, as I remember it, there was also—because a lot of buildings and homes were built with a combination of cow dung, straw, and earth, and then tamarind seed as something to strengthen it. And then very thick walls were built up, which are great insulation as well because they keep cool in the summer and warm in the winter. I think Bob had seen— Mani, my mother-in-law, had had one of these houses, a small one, a hut built in the garden. So that was there. Then they were occasionally embellished with mirror work and seeds and all sorts of things from whatever you find around you. There are some really quite interesting images of trains and all sorts of things that people have seen and that they then depict on these walls. So I think the sense of earth being used as something else was also part of the sort of visual environment that probably Bob encountered.

Q: So you said that some of these people who were showing these techniques were brought in. So these people that Anand brought in, was this at Bob's request? I'm just curious about— because I look at these raw materials for the *Bones* [1975] and *Unions* [1975] series—

Sarabhai: Again, I wasn't in on all those particulars, but I do think it probably was very much a combination of Anand suggesting ideas and Bob saying yes or no or maybe, or Bob asking, saying, "I'd like to do this," and "How do we do it?" At that point someone would be brought in. But there were no experts on it. It was just slightly ad hoc. "Somebody might know something about that, so let's ask them." It was really—I think the word organic is bandied around rather horribly at the moment—

Q: Carelessly, yes.

Sarabhai: But I think, actually, it was really very much part of a process that just emerged as you went along and it was really trial and error and seeing what worked and what didn't. I think Sidney Felsen, if I remember right, was completely sort of, "What is going on?" [Laughs] All this sort of smelly stuff. And he was there—but he was great. In fact I must say everyone was just amazing during that because it was such a disparate group in a way and yet on the whole it just worked. It worked quite fluently on the whole, probably helped with some Jack Daniel's.

[Laughter]

Q: So I'm curious. In all of this, I found these photographs of you working with Bob. It's just a couple of them here. And so I'm just curious, as a way of thinking about what his process was and how the whole team was—

Sarabhai: Actually, I haven't even seen that photograph.

Q: Right. So I'm just curious if you could look through these and you can just comment on the sort of things that you were doing and the instructions that you were given. These photos show you reaching into this bucket, what might have been the rag-mud or something like this and kind of molding it.



Rauschenberg and Asha Sarabhai working on *Unions* series (1975), Sarabhai Retreat, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 1975

Sarabhai: This was the mud-mud. This was the one with the fenugreek and the tamarind and the turmeric and the tamarind seeds. No, I was probably just following instructions and doing exactly what I was told to do. But it was funny. This mix was made up by—there's somebody who I wish you could talk to. I don't even know how much he remembers, but he's still there, someone called Manu [Dantani], who was very young at the point. But he worked very closely as a hands-on person throughout. He's probably in the photograph that is in the *Jammers* catalogue. He's a great guy. His two sons now work with us and help. I'm sure Manu must be—

Q: That's just sort of a group shot that was taken—



Celebration at Asha and Suhrid Sarabhai's house for everyone involved in the *Bones* and *Unions* project (both series 1975). Pictured (alphabetically): Pal Babu; Rosamund, Sidney, and Suzanne Felsen; Hildegard Lamfrom; Pallavi Mayor; Tribhuvan Mistry; Robert Rauschenberg; Charles Ritt; Anand, Asha, Samir, Sanjay, Suhrid, and Manorama Sarabhai; Hisachika Takahashi; Girdharbhai (unidentified); and workers from Kalam Khush paper mill, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, www.gianfrancogorgoni.it. Courtesy: Suhrid Sarabhai

Sarabhai: Yes, that was at our house.

Q: —apparently as a celebration, yes.

Sarabhai: I'm trying to see where Manu is. I think that's Manu, if I'm not mistaken. It's either that or he looks very different here. There was another person who worked very closely on the project who is sadly no longer there, called Girdharbhai. But Manu was very much somebody who helped make all these mixtures. So it was basically this wet stuff that was in there, very smelly, but because of the heat it dried quite quickly initially. It was only later, in fact, after everyone left that the monsoons—it gets pre-monsoon in early June—and that was when the trouble began actually because some of them which hadn't dried out began getting slightly moldy. So there was the whole thing about how do you fumigate them and what do you do to get rid of it? But initially, when they were there, because there was no humidity, it was working fine. And then it became something that really needed to be thought through.

The other thing Bob kept doing was to insert things in them or to make windows onto stuff, which was—that was all Bob. I think that whole thing was all Bob, but I think the actual mixes of things were probably just like making a chutney in the kitchen and just adding what could or couldn't go in. But I think that's how it really emerged.

Q: And of course, as you mentioned, you're raising two young boys at this time. Have you ever done anything like this before? I'm curious about your own thinking about this—

Sarabhai: Mud pies, yes.

[Laughter]

Q: Exactly. But thinking about this sort of element of disruption or change or of things being turned upside down, I'm curious.

Sarabhai: I loved it. I loved it partly because it was just so—it just felt right. It didn't feel as though it was an interruption. It felt as though this is what life should be. [Laughs] No, I love it. Samir was young, but he was happy to be a part of it. Sanjay was already at school so he was away for part of the day. No, it was very—again, I hate the words energizing and inspirational, but it was really all that and more, just being there. Because right the way through, knowing Bob, I never ceased to wonder at the kind of tremendous energy he brought to everything, whether it was when— I went first on my own to stay in Captiva [Florida], but then, at one point, Suhrid and the children and I went. He was extraordinary. He had gone out and filled the fridge. He

came to pick us up and he said, “We’re going to stop by at a supermarket because even though I’ve filled the fridge with stuff for the children, I’m sure there’s stuff that they’d like to find.” So he let them run around, picking out whatever they want. In anything he did, probably most of all in the art, but I think it was just the way he was with another person that felt—there was an incredible generosity of spirit in it, which really made you feel.

It was odd because the other day, when Gina mentioned doing this, I hadn’t really thought about it. But I woke up in the morning to thinking what was it that really struck me about Bob? The main thing was that it was as though he thought—the way I felt it was that he thought the potential in every human being was there to either be more of themselves or to be both more of themselves and more of something else. So it was this strange thing of drawing out and bringing in—that you could just keep expanding in the best sense.

That’s something that again I felt very powerfully during that time. So it didn’t feel like a disruption at all. It was like swimming in the sea. You were there and you just did it. It was great. I’m really not romanticizing at all. I know there were probably run-ins with people and I’m sure there were difficult moments, but I didn’t experience any of that. I had experienced run-ins with Mani about it occasionally and with Anand occasionally because I was told, “You shouldn’t be talking so late into the night,” and stuff like that. But apart from that it just felt very fluent and very much as it should be, if there is such a thing. So personally, for me it was great. There was a kind of spark that just kept everything going, which made the heat completely irrelevant.

Q2: Did Bob give specific instructions—

Sarabhai: To people to—

Q2: It's funny because I know when I've asked Bob Petersen, he said, "I don't really remember Bob giving instructions."

Sarabhai: It was just—everyone was just doing it. It was like that Nike ad, "Just do it." It really is what I think happened. Then things happened and Sidney, I think, was probably having to think of the technical side. But there was no sense of—it was an experiment and it was an experiment in seeing how you could stretch boundaries. Again, it's a post-thought, but thinking about reflectively, I'm sure I would imagine that that's what Bob was doing, just pushing the boundaries of material and seeing how to do it. Because there was a prevalence of bamboo there and there were textiles and there was the paper and there was mud and there was earth. Because of the heat there was a lot of wet earth and mud. So you really felt—your feet would sometimes squish into it. So I think that all these things were probably impressions that found a way into the work. But that's just a personal thought on it because actually we never really talked about the work. When one was helping, one just did it.

I think the other thing about Bob was that there was always a sense of quiet assurance that he knew what he was doing. Yet he was willing to turn it all upside down if need be. But in the end, as I said, that's just very much a personal response.

Q2: From what I know, Bob didn't consider things mistakes.

Sarabhai: Exactly, yes.

Q2: It's like oh, free drawing or accidental drawings. Things that happened and he would just incorporate. It was like, "Okay, just change the direction or something."

Sarabhai: No, I'm sure that's true. The first time I went to Captiva, I didn't feel it was that different actually—the working situation there. It felt very much of a piece. It was obviously completely different because it was a different sort of—but at the same time, the way it was done, it felt as though he carried his way of doing things wherever he was. As you say, it was a very open-ended way. It was allowing things in, which in many ways, I think it's the only way in India because unless you have a very fixed idea and you just go in and do that, which narrows the field enormously, I think you really do need to lay yourself open to possibility and error and basically to what happens to happen. Which doesn't mean that you don't have a sense of it or you're not actually in touch with it. But it means that it can surprise you as well. I'm sure that was part of the enlivening part of what happened. It probably was a tough part for the people who were trying to keep it organized and keep it under control. [Laughs] But again, Anand, to his credit, was also a very experimental kind of person and became more so as time went on. I think it's everything bounced off each other and things seemed to work.

There were, I think, some difficult moments food-wise, because we were all vegetarian.

[Laughter]

Q: Could you give a little bit more about that, Asha?

Sarabhai: We knew about the Sachika episode, which we won't go into— [Laughs]

Q: The peacock.

Sarabhai: Well, yes. But I think Bob had left by then because then he went to Delhi. And I actually met them in Delhi. There is quite a vague memory. Then they went onto Kashmir. Then he and Bob Petersen went to Srinagar and stayed in a houseboat, I think.

But yes, I think it was actually quite productive, not just in terms of the actual things that were made there, but I think the reverberations and the way Bob incorporated it into what he did later were probably not necessarily at all measurable. But I'm sure they were there as echoes for some time.

At the same time, they were very much of a piece with what now one knows he did before. I went to Bilbao [Spain] to the opening when Bob was there and when you see that whole body of work, you just say, "God, there's nothing he didn't do." [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 1998–99.] How can any young artist actually enter this field without feeling completely— But again, I think the other amazing thing was—and again, I don't know because I'm not an artist—but I think that the generosity and the way he did things left the doors open to people to keep doing. And yet he touched everything—every

possible material, every possible imagery. It's so striking when you see it all as a body of work and you know there's that much more as well.

The other thing that—and I don't know, it's only a thought—but the Retreat [in Ahmedabad] where they were, where this work basically happened, it's got incredible vegetation. So it's very rich with trees and plants and birds and squirrels and creatures in general, including mosquitoes. But when I went to Captiva the first time, it was this feeling of how important the outside was in the way Bob transmuted it into something that basically was inside. Because the night—I think I may have told you this—when I came to New York and I was staying here [381 Lafayette Street], I was staying in the house. Bob was already in Captiva and Sachika was here. He asked Sachika to travel with me to Captiva, to basically escort me to Captiva. And the plane was very delayed. So instead of reaching there at eight or nine o'clock in the evening, we must have reached it—we'd spoken to Bob and he said, "I'll have dinner ready, we'll do it"—it actually got there at three or four o'clock in the morning. So Sachika said, "Oh, we'll go home." But Bob was in the airport waiting. And then when we got there, he drove us home. After we got there, he said, "Do you feel like driving around the island?" I said, "Yes, why not." It was just beginning to be dawn and light. It was the most extraordinary experience of driving through this amazing landscape and vegetation, and realizing afterwards how embedded in him it was as a space around him. It just felt as though you moved from one end to the other without any sense of disjunction at all, which I loved. It has, right the way through, been a very important part of my life.

Q: I'd like to actually ask a follow-up about that inside/outside dynamic as far as the visit to the Retreat went. So you had the Retreat and you had the larger city surrounding it, so sort of in the city but apart from the city in the sense that there's this enclosure.

Sarabhai: Very much apart, yes, yes.

Q: Some of the other people who were on the trip have commented on that sense that there was life inside the Retreat and there was life outside. So I'm curious if you could talk about that aspect of the trip, where Bob was and where all of this work was being created, that inside/outside dynamic, thinking about that setting.

Sarabhai: The Retreat is very much what it sounds like. It's true. You enter a gate and then it's like a huge walled-in space or a compound. You forget about the walls because there are so many trees. At that point, there were four or five different members of the family living in their own spaces in it. And there was the main family house, which now houses the museum but which didn't at that point. When you come in, it's as though you are entering a different microenvironment as well because the temperature drops because of all the trees. It's much cooler. It's much less dusty because it's watered down twice a day in the summer.

But it can feel very unreal too at times, being there, because the minute you go into town, it's busy, busy, busy. You used to hear nothing but the honking of rickshaw horns. There's traffic which is—like crazy traffic. But it's also very vibrant. Everyone manages to just avoid hitting into each other by a hair's breadth. But the Retreat is very separate from this outer city life. And

yet there are people coming in and out, who go about their daily lives possibly in the Retreat and then perhaps go out to where their homes are. So it's not divorced from people in that sense, but it can feel very unreal. It's a wonderful environment because it is so special in its own way. But there are moments when you just think, I want to be in touch with real life out there.

And that, luckily, I think Bob did manage to do some of—not all of, because if you're working, you're quite intensely working on what you're doing. But going to the paper mills, going to the fabric shops, driving around the city. And then one day, when they really desperately wanted non-vegetarian food, we all went to this dhaba—they're like roadside places where all the truck drivers stop and have either chicken and meat. It's quite strange, but there are a lot of vegetarians who pretend to be vegetarians at home and then go out to eat at these places.

So there was some going out, but there wasn't a huge amount of interaction with the outside world, if you like, and even in terms of just meeting people who lived in Ahmedabad who you might normally have met, like other artists or even friends. In that sense I think Anand and Hildegard and possibly Mani—but I think more Anand and Hildegard—were very focused on this being a productive project. So I think it was slightly complex, but it was also possibly what made it possible to happen in that kind of intensity. I can't even remember now exactly how long a period of time it was. It was about two and a half weeks.

Q: I think it was twenty-three days, if I remember right.

Sarabhai: Twenty-three days, yes, in Ahmedabad, and then they—

Q2: I believe so, yes.

Sarabhai: And then they went on. So it wasn't like—well it was probably like a hothouse. It was like being in a greenhouse, which is very pressured in one way, but also just immensely—you were just trying out things and didn't know where they would lead. And so that in itself was quite intense. Bob used to start the day late-ish—not that early—because he was up late. Anand and Mani were all very early starters to the day. So perhaps Anand felt that if more chunks of the day were taken away by being out and about—but also it was such a large group in itself that the dining table, with everyone there, it was quite— So there wasn't a lot of other socializing there that went on. And yet everyone had dinner together in the evenings pretty much most nights.

But there is a divide between the outside and the inside because in India, in any case, there is a big divide still between—it's changing and it's getting better, but there is still a lot of poverty. Which in many ways, I don't know, sixty or more years on from independence is not how it should be. Things are changing, but at the moment, the change is really more affecting the middle class in terms of prosperity and stuff. But more is being done and many more people are aware of what needs to be done and many more people are beginning to pressure the government to do it. So hopefully things will change.

But from that point of view, it's not an easy thing to see and it's not an easy thing to live with even when you live there. I think for children it's very hard because it's as though you have to separate out to different arenas of life; because if you see and you see very intensely, it's very

hard to live with that all the time. And so you often see people almost shutting out things. Again, I think that was in every way the great thing about Bob—that he never shut out things. It was always you open up to it.

It may sound ridiculous—I think it's often as difficult for children who have as it is for children who don't, because you're very aware of that difference and you have no way of justifying it, in a sense, of why there are these big differences. It continues to be a part of there's an inside and an outside. I think it is very important to continue being outside so that you at least begin to feel there's something you can do about it. But in terms of the work it was very much like an enclosed space.

Q: Maybe one way to think a little about the influence of the larger city is to talk a little bit about the mill because there was this work happening there and, of course, the mill has a huge population of workers there. So I'm curious about what role the mill itself and its workers played in this, thinking about this larger process of—

Sarabhai: Are you talking about the textile mill or the paper mill?

Q: Well, let's do both, yes.

Sarabhai: The textile mill—Bob didn't actually interact directly with the Calico Mills part of it because that was much more mechanized. So the fabrics that we went out and looked for were the Khadi ones, which were the handspun and the handwoven and they were the second-hand

ones that were found in these piles where people were selling them. So that interaction with the actual mill fabrics and the mill process, which—actually Frank Stella later did some work based on that. But Bob didn't really interact with the Calico Mills part that much as far as I remember. In his case, it was the paper mill, which was a much smaller group of people. That was very much on Gandhian principles of entirely hand-based work so everything was moved around by hand, the paper pulp and the drying. So in that part there were outside people and he did go there. But again because of the language issue it was always in translation.

Q: So who was translating then?

Sarabhai: Probably Anand a lot of the time. I was if I was there or Suhrid or Mani. But it was through an intermediary, but in some of the language, it's pretty direct when you know what you want. But on the translation part, probably things may have gotten lost in translation. But Anand was quite efficient about that, I think. There were a group of people who were masons. There were people who were carpenters. There were people around. Girdharbhai was a carpenter, for instance, and he is no longer there, but he was a very good carpenter. He was able to help with some of the things. Then there were groups that were brought in to get things from the market. So there was a group of people scurrying about, bringing in things or making things if they needed to be done or helping to make the mixtures that went into this.

And again because of the way Bob worked—which was what was so nice—everyone who had helped or been involved came to the party afterwards, which was at our house. It was really nice. But it was really an interaction that ended at the close of day when they went home. It was really

a working kind of relationship more than one that—I'm sure that was partly linguistic as well.

But it was partly the way things are set up as well. Does that sort of answer?

Q: Yes, that does. I was just curious about this larger collaboration with the—

Sarabhai: Well, as I say, Manu would be—if someone were trying to resolve a problem, he'd say, "Why don't you try this?" or "Why don't you—?" So there were interactions and suggestions that would come in from people, which were tried out. In that way people were very good about suggesting different possibilities. That was there for sure.

Q2: Did people like working with Bob or because of the language barrier did it even matter?

Could it have been anybody?

Sarabhai: Sorry, say that again.

Q2: The mill workers, did they enjoy working with Bob or did it not really matter?

Sarabhai: No, they did. I think everyone really had such a good time. They really enjoyed working with it. And I say that really with complete respect for Bob because it was very different from—there have been other people who came and I don't want to name names, but some of the Brits, where there was a kind of colonial thing, where the people at the paper mill refused to work because of the attitude. Because this was a complete intrusion on their work. It wasn't as though they were there—

Q2: I was wondering if they resented it at all or—

Sarabhai: No, they were just so cooperative. Initially it was just going there to see what was being done. And then when Bob wanted to do some stuff, they were very open to it because of his way with people. It immediately sets a kind of interaction, which is very—

Q2: More personal?

Sarabhai: Yes, whereas other people have gone in as though, “Come on now, you’re going to do this for me,” and been very bossy. There is absolutely no reason why they should do it. They were helping out and they were giving their time to do something as a favor, not out of any obligation. But no, there was nobody who worked with Bob who had a problem as far as I know, as far as I’m aware of. It was a very respectful way of working. For him, there was no division between someone cleaning your shoes or someone not doing it, which is what was, I think, really very important. [Narrator note: Essentially, his attitude was democratic, not hierarchical.]

Q: And so for the workers who were in this mill every day, this was something they did in addition to their usual work or—I’m curious about how this was integrated into the routine at the mill.

Sarabhai: Yes. At the paper mill, because we knew the person who worked there, he allowed them to take time off. It was part of their working day so they didn’t do it in extra time. But the

mill, it's fairly flexible because they—now it's more so, but there were not that many people interested in the actual quality of that paper, which is extraordinary. It was more used for—they were making government files and booklets for governments. They were really feeding a rather sad and dusty kind of occupation of these mounted official files and stuff. For them it was actually quite exciting as well to be doing something quite different. I think apart from anything else it was a change in what they were doing—which is fun too.

Q: Because this wasn't his first paper project, of course.

Sarabhai: No.

Q: He did the project in France prior [*Pages* and *Fuses* series, both 1974, produced in collaboration with the Moulin à Papier Richard de Bas paper mill, Ambert, France] and so just thinking of this collaborative process, how much did he know or seem to know about making this paper? He'd had these lessons in France, I'm sure, but I'm curious about how he got all these—

Sarabhai: Yes. The answer is I don't really know. But I do know what excited him was the fact that it was rubbished rags. It was rag paper. He was very excited by the idea of stuff being chopped up and mushed up and being turned into paper. But I don't know how much he already knew or didn't know about rag paper. That's not something I'm aware of at all. The paper in France, presumably, was that also rag—

Q2: I think it was rag paper. I should go back and read about the pulp, where the pulp came from. I know they had a huge press that—

Sarabhai: Because these were all very basic, the presses where they moved the stuff and then pressed these papers. Then you'd just get these sheets of paper drying and then piled up. It's quite beautiful actually, just to see the process, but also just to see these piles of paper and the hanging paper. It's like lots of laundry sheets being put out. But I don't know any more than that on the—



Workers at the Kalam Khush paper mill, Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 1975

Q: Well, one question that we've been building up towards is the art that was produced through this process: the *Bones* and *Union* pieces themselves. So I'm curious, then, given that you saw these pieces being developed—you helped make them yourself—what your relationship to these pieces is. You see them formed; they're finished.



Robert Rauschenberg
Little Joe (Bones), 1975
Handmade paper with bamboo and fabric
24 x 28 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches (61 x 72.4 x 8.9 cm)
From an edition of 34, produced by Gemini
G.E.L., Los Angeles



Robert Rauschenberg
Capitol (Unions), 1975
Rag-mud, bamboo, silk, string, glass, and teakwood
34 x 53 1/2 x 4 inches (86.4 x 135.9 x 10.2 cm),
dimensions variable
From an edition of 10, published by Gemini G.E.L.,
Los Angeles

Sarabhai: We've lived with one, which I've currently re-found. It had been put away. We've had it—there's a triangular piece with a piece of fabric in the middle, which we've had encased in a kind of glass case [*Little Joe (Bones)*, 1975]. The glass cracked so we have got to repair it. But I think all of it felt like something very new, that it was changing forms or materials that you knew about into something else which was playful, but also it brought in that whole feeling that functionality doesn't only reside in something you can use, but also in what gives you pleasure. I think there was a sense in the work and in seeing it all or seeing it evolve and laughing about it and laughing about the smells that made you realize that actually, there's nothing sacrosanct about materials or what they become. But having participated in the process, you become very aware, in a sense, of how art is really about doing, that it is really making, living, and doing—it's that rather than something set apart.

For me, it was really that removal from the museums into a domestic space, if that makes any sense, that I love about it. Ever since then, I don't know, you sense it or feel it in all of Bob's work, that it's what it happens to be. I think it's a bit like what I was saying about the potential of things, that they both inhere in themselves, but they also inhere in being able to become something so much more than just that material. And that I loved. That's alchemy and I think he had that, he had the capacity, for me anyway, to turn things into gold in the best sense, into gold that was right across every imaginable kind of— It was about light. It was about sound. I remember, again in Bilbao I think, that *Soundings* [1968] piece, which I just thought was so—you just stand there and you think god, this is amazing. I don't want to go anywhere else—just to stand and look and listen.



Robert Rauschenberg
Soundings, 1968
Mirrored Plexiglas and silkscreen ink on
Plexiglas with concealed electric lights
and electronic components
96 x 432 x 54 inches (243.8 x 1097.3 x
137.2 cm)
Museum Ludwig, Cologne
Ludwig Donation

But I think it was that breaking down of the barriers between things; that, to me, was very powerful. I'm sure that somewhere inside of me must have known he was doing that, even though it may not have been so obvious. I think he was really constant. It was even in what he did here and that was what was so nice about it. It was not just playful, but it was transgressive. He said, "I want to try this," and somebody said, "No, you can't do that. That won't work." And

he said, “No, but I’m going to do it.” So there was a great determination in him to find a way, which was how all these different things began to be suggested, whether it was the fenugreek seeds or— Because if Sidney would say or Mani would say, “But that won’t work. It won’t last,” he would say, “No, we’re going to do it.” And so ways were found to doing that.

I think that was the other thing, that he never gave up easily. Even if he knew, he said, “If it crumbles, it crumbles. But we’re going to try doing it.” [Narrator note: Success or permanence was not really the issue; the experiment was.] I think that was very much the spirit, certainly behind the mud works, possibly even more than the paper works.

Q2: I know you said that you thought his experience in India really influenced some of his other work. How do you feel his being in India influenced anything in India or even on a personal level— Did he have any influence at all—

Sarabhai: Again, as I say, it’s a great pity that there wasn’t enough intermingling of the outside world in terms of actually seeing what was done there or not. It’s been more incidental if people have then come and seen it. I hope in time we can change that now. And Anand is no longer there. Whatever we have there, it would be wonderful to be able to make it more available to people to be able to see or to people to come and work there themselves and to have that kind of referencing around them, which is quite unusual. Personally, I’m not an artist, but it did have a profound influence on the way I thought about life ever since. And the fact of that sense of affinity, for want of a better word, has sparked off all sorts of different ways of thinking about things and being in the world, which to me is actually the most important. And it’s very much a

personal thing. But I think if anybody can do that, artist, friend, whoever, I think it's a huge gift to be able to make someone else see differently, think differently, be differently, in a way. That certainly, to me, was the most important part of the interaction I had with Bob.

One of the last times I spoke to him was actually when he was at Gemini and he very kindly sent me something through this and I said, "You can't do that, Bob." He said, "Well, I'm willing to take half the blame if you'll take the other half of the blame." So what would you say to that? It was like balances that just moved. There's no weighing scale and yet there are fine tunings that— And I feel that when I see so much of his work, that everything is in this kind of strange— It's held aloft or whatever. It's there and it's irrefutable. And yet it's not sort of banging away. It's not hammering at you. I don't know if any of that makes any sense. [Laughs]

Q: No, it does, actually.

Sarabhai: It's certainly what stays with me. Sorry, go on.

Q: No, I think maybe there seems to be this point of intersection between his work and yours, which is in textiles. He comes out of this encounter and he goes and he does the *Jammers* project, which is totally textile-centered. And then, of course, you've gone on to do your own work in textiles. So I'm curious then about that point of intersection, given that he came out of this really focused on that and then around this time, you're also—

Sarabhai: Working much more in textiles.

Q: Yes, building up your own momentum.

Sarabhai: No, it's actually very interesting because I've never thought about that. One of the exchanges that often happened when I encountered Bob was— Once in Venice when we were all there and I was wearing a shawl, he said, "Oh, I've lost my shawl like that." So I just took it off and put it on him. The same thing in Bilbao, I was wearing a bright blue tie-dyed scarf that we'd made around my neck. And he said, "That's an amazing blue." So I don't know if you've seen—I have photographs of Bob in Bilbao at that opening and he's got this scarf around his neck.

So it's funny because I hadn't thought of the textile thing at all, but it's interesting that you raise that point. But it was very much there in the dialogue between him—literally almost. But I'm sure it did probably affect work when I went on to do it because a lot of it was very much about what the material spoke to you to do; what the constraints of it were, but also what the give in it was. A lot of the work has been linked to the actual structure of the fabric, but then what you can apply to it or do with it or change it into or what you can wreak from it literally and what it can be brought into, if that makes any sense. Yes, I'm sure. I never, never thought of that connection, but that's partly because I probably don't think enough.

[Laughter]

But no, I'm sure it must have led somewhere in what I went on to do, which was to work with textiles a lot. And I think textiles, again, are so fundamental to our being from when you're very

small, because you're swaddled in fabric as soon as you're born. In that way, fabric has always been part of memories of walking alongside your mother and sniffing at her sari or something. So it's very tactile and it's very much there. The *Hoarfrosts* [1974–76] have always, to me, seemed among some of the most extraordinary and extraordinarily evocative pieces of Bob's because again, they just seemed to shimmer there and you know there's something there, but you're not quite sure what. Thank you, Bob. I never thought of [laughs]—no, it's interesting. I will go away and think about it in relation to what I've done subsequently.



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (*Hoarfrost*), 1975
Solvent transfer on fabric and cardboard
71 x 51 inches (180.3 x 129.5 cm)
Private collection

Q: I'm interested in that because you've had a series of artists stay there since. Lynda Benglis has been there. Roy Lichtenstein has been there.

Sarabhai: I don't know how much Bob spoke to other people about his time there. I'm not aware of that. But I think people did come probably through his having been there. It probably set a standard.

Q2: I think so. Because I didn't work with Bob in the art, I didn't really have a lot of discussion with him. But certainly I've heard from others—your name came up a lot. So just the whole project there seemed to be—you said that this was really the first time—

Sarabhai: It was the first time certainly within our immediate family. As I say, Calder had been there much earlier, and Noguchi, and John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and David Tudor had been there as friends. Then they would often go mushroom hunting in the Himalayas. So that connection was there. But no one had actually come at Mani's house in the Retreat, come and worked there in that way.

I think the first person after Bob, if I'm not mistaken, was Frank Stella and Harriet [McGurk] came in 1977. It was completely different in a way, but it was also very interesting because Frank came with a—he'd done one of these polystyrene cutouts of what he had hoped to do there. And then, what used to happen, from the States they used to send to India sheets of printed metal that had been—either with a Pepsi-Cola or Sprite or whatever where there was a slight misprint and they couldn't use it. They were shipped in and became part of the recycled metal industry. People would make spice boxes and kerosene pourers and all sorts of things with these things. So we went to the market and found bits of these sheets. Frank, from having thought that he was only going to make one thing there, then did a whole series of what became the *Indian*

Birds series [1978–79] of these small maquettes, which again it was lovely because we were all helping do them. But we also went to a bird sanctuary nearby, which is really beautiful, and I think that's how the birds of India thing probably came into it.

And again, funny enough, Harriet and Frank's wedding announcement was a photograph that Suhrid took while he was there. He was absolutely amazed that instead of just one thing that he came away with, I think it was eleven or twelve pieces that were all made out of these recycled metal sheets into these small maquettes, which he then came and blew up into the full scale *Indian Birds* series.

So they came in '77. Then quite a few years later [Robert] Bob Kushner, Kim MacConnel, that whole group of—Holly Solomon—they came and spent some time there. And then Alan Shields was there. Then Lynda Benglis and Anand became partners. They became partners after she came out there and worked. [Robert] Bob Morris came. I'm just trying to remember. It was a whole series of other artists who followed on after Bob.

Q: This went on through the eighties and the nineties into the present or—

Sarabhai: It was yes, almost into the present. Howard Hodgkin came from London and [Richard] Dick Smith was there. And an English painter called Malcolm Morley, who was based in New York, was out there very briefly and I think that was quite a traumatic experience for everyone. And then actually it began petering off after Lynda and Anand began living together. She continued to do quite a lot of work there. But then just after Anand died, we've had a very

young—I think she’s a good artist—a girl who happens to be the daughter of friends of ours, Nigel and Janet Unwin. Actually her father is a scientist, an amazing scientist, and her mother is English and used to be an art teacher. He’s from New Zealand, but she has grown up in England and Stanford [California]. And she must be in her mid-thirties: Phoebe Unwin. She came the year after Anand died and worked in the studio. She’s got a good gallery in London called the Wilkinson Gallery. She’s got a few pieces that the Tate bought. For her sins, she was also taken up by [Charles] Saatchi for a bit. [Laughs] But I think she’s very focused.

So it would be something that would be nice to restart because I think it’s strangely, in spite of all the limitations, it’s also a very giving environment to work in. Phoebe was saying, for instance, that at her stage in life, it’s wonderful to be able to just wake up and walk to your studio and have this environment around you and work in it, which she did for almost a month. And I think for young people to have an opportunity like that is something that would be— And I think we have a very interesting thing—what happened in Ahmedabad is in addition to the actual quality of the work itself, I think it’s the sense of the process that it set into motion and possibility that it set into motion that is quite an interesting aspect because you can begin to think about certain things differently, about material differently. And you respond, I suppose, to the environment as well. So it’s how it then perhaps nourishes the work you go on to do later in ways which aren’t necessarily A to B, but which may become a kind of underlay. I think one gets that feeling with possibly quite a lot of the people who work there; that it wasn’t something that just stopped. It wasn’t just a defined project. It was something that had echoes that could emerge at different moments in time.

From my point of view, I think if young people can have that opportunity, even early on in their career, it might be a very nice staging post on the way to what they go on to do. So these are all thoughts that, at the moment, we're trying to think through, of how we can do it in a quiet, understated kind of way. Because nobody wants to turn—the house, which you probably know, is a [Charles-Édouard Jeanneret] Le Corbusier house, so it's special in itself. I think it's one of his best domestic projects because it's very much inside and outside and the two work together in conjunction. But to have that space and then the outside space and then a studio space, all a stone's throw away, all part of the same thing, and to be able to work there, I think would be very nice.

We don't want it to become a museum. We've very clear about that. But to have it as a space where you could enjoy— In fact, the main kind of thought that has come to both my and Suhrid's mind is something of the nature of Kettle's Yard, which when Jim Ede started it, it was very much for students. Students would come and borrow a painting to take home to their rooms for the term and live with it, which I think is an amazing thought. And then they would have music recitals there. They have a very good art library with a huge table, so you can go in there and sit and read the books. You can't take them home now, but you can sit and read there.

And then what they began doing is to invite an artist or a ceramicist to come in and to just playfully change some of the things, but in a way where you hardly notice it until you— It's the sort of thing that makes you look again. So they had a ceramicist called Edmund de Waal who came in and did some work and moved things around. But it's a very respectful and a very

inventive kind of interplay between new and bringing in something new for a short time, but also not disturbing.

Q: So you think that might be a bit of a model—

Sarabhai: It might be interesting to think in those terms because it's also a great space for music. We used to in the past often have small music recitals. So that would be lovely and it would keep it alive. I think that's the main thing, that if it becomes a museum that you just walk through, it dies. It's very much a domestic space. It's not a Donald Judd house in the sense—it's wonderful to walk through the Donald Judd house [Judd Foundation, New York], but you feel it's a tour. And that's something that we really want to try and avoid if we—I feel quite strongly that that's not what the house is.

Q: And so for you, thinking about the house then in this alternative frame. Is that something that traces back to Bob's visit in this sort of—

Sarabhai: Not directly in any way. Anand never himself gave any indication or never really spoke about what he would like it to be. So in a sense, one can't really relate it to any of that. So I think it really has to be what whoever is there now can try and put together and try and make work from it. It's easier said than done, in a way, because it will need— But at that same time, it's very much a potential waiting to be realized. If we can do it in a quiet, congenial, and inviting way, I hope that works. So no, it's very much a question of having begun to think about

it in the last while, since Anand died; before that, you would just assume people are there forever. They're doing what they do and they look after it. But you're suddenly faced with this—

Q2: Maintaining something.

Sarabhai: Yes.

Q2: Bob had said that he wanted Captiva to become a residency program, so that's—

Sarabhai: Well, that sounds so wonderful. Actually, when I read it, when you sent me that thing, I think it's a great—that's another model. But that's so much, the spread of it is so—

Q2: But it is a way of keeping energy—

Sarabhai: But it is what he said he wanted?

Q2: Yes.

Sarabhai: You see, whereas Anand never— Even though the house technically was both Suhrid and Anand's, because we had our own place, Anand was living there, so one always thought of it as his space. But now that he isn't there, it's something that needs to be thought through and then implemented sooner rather than later because Suhrid is seventy-four, touch wood, and in good health. I'm sixty-six. And there's just Samir, Asami [Sarabhai], his wife, and their girls [Mila

and Maia Sarabhai], who really so far don't have much of a connection to the work. Our granddaughters are thirteen and eight.

But I think I was telling you that Mila just—it's the first time she's mentioned it, our older granddaughter—she said to me, because she must have heard me mention the name or say that it would be nice to come when we're here. So just before I left, she said, "Oh, funny. We just saw something by Bob Rauschenberg." So I said, "Oh yes? What was that?" She said, "You know that bed—that quilt that he took and destroyed?" [Note: *Bed*] So I said, "Yes, it's great." She said, "Hmm, he threw all this stuff at it." So it's the first time there's been a kind of awareness/connection in her mind, which is really nice and it was nice that it was just before I was coming here. So let's see what they make of it all, because both the girls themselves in what they do are very interested in making things and doing things with their hands. So who knows where it might go, what it's worth?

Q2: Are they interested in textiles too?

Sarabhai: Yes, but also the younger one is fascinated with paper. Her mother is half Japanese, so there's the whole— It starts with the origami. But she's much more visceral about it. [Laughs] She doesn't do it all very neat. She gets frustrated with herself that she can't do the very neat versions and get it quite precise and exact, but I just keep saying under my breath, "Thank goodness for that."

Q: So I have one final question that—

Sarabhai: I'm sorry. I hope I'm not digressing too—

Q: No, not all, not at all. Actually, I think it all comes together. So you maintained this relationship with Bob through the years. I found a quote in some of your correspondence with him, which I think actually sums up this trip in May and June, but also a lot of these larger things that you were talking about—your relationship with him and these moments. You wrote that, “Time was so short and yet long—for it was able to contain much of warmth and gentleness and care.” And so, before we close out, I'm curious if you have anything else that you'd like to say or add about either the trip itself, those late nights with him, your relationship since—just kind of going into an open mode here.

Sarabhai: There's everything to say and nothing to say, in a sense, because it was so complete in itself and yet there was a promise of so much more time. I just regret that I didn't come back to Captiva or the States to visit him again. We lost our son and I went into a kind of— And Bob was amazing. And I lost my parents, but he at that point— Again, what I said earlier about this sense of someone there, backing you and that you could lean against, even though it was just in your head. After my parents died he sent me the most beautiful thing. He spoke to me and he said, “I'm going to send you something and I want you to smile when you see it.” I just said, “Yes.” And then this tube arrived and in it is the most beautiful painting of his with a baby eagle, an image of a baby eagle, a bunch of lychees, a bit of pale orange sky, and a baby turtle. The note he sent with it—there's an image of Bob smiling in the painting too—said, “My smile should be on your face.” I look at it every morning and I just think—it's how do you turn

something into something else? How do you turn something that has really taken a huge amount away from you into something that reminds you of what you still have?

For me, again it's entirely personal, but that continues to be the thing that stays with me, even in dark moments. When I heard about Bob's not being there, I was in London at the time. I felt devastated as I'm sure every— And I just suddenly thought, if you sit here and mope, what is it going to do? So I went on my own to this very nice restaurant. I just actually drank two Bellinis to Bob because that's what we'd done in Venice. I sat there and I just spent that whole time sort of keeping him alive rather than someone who was no longer there. There was nothing supernatural or anything about it. It was just that he was— It's a sense of somebody. I think if you felt someone there with you very strongly through many years, they don't go away.

When we came and knocked on the door last year, we hadn't been to America for twenty-five years. And I said to Suhrid, "I don't know who's there, but I just want to go there." And he said, "You're crazy. You can't just come and go knock on the door." It was a bit like tramps coming and saying, "I stayed here once. Please, can I come in?"

[Laughter]

Sarabhai: But it just felt something I wanted to do. It wasn't that I needed to do it; I wanted to do it. So it's more than a moment. In fact after Bilbao I went— Every so often, for my sins, I try and do bits of writing. I wrote this long sort of thing about—it's grandiose to call it a poem—but it was something about the feelings I had after seeing the retrospective in Bilbao. To me, it was

everything that was in Bob and outside of Bob, in a sense [note: see “Retrospective Rauschenberg,” p. 63].

But no, he was just someone I suppose I cared for very deeply. I don't know. He always gave that back as well, as a feeling, and it just felt— It was reciprocity in the best sense. Even though in a sense, I always felt I didn't really have anything to give. [Laughs] But that was his generosity as well, that he made you feel at that moment in time that that was what was the most important thing. I just feel it was something that I will always value deeply. The work is a whole other opening out into something else and the two, in a sense, are separate. But they're linked at a very fundamental level. But the real enjoyment and pleasure I get out of the work is something that has grown through my encountering it and looking at it. But the other is solid background. It's like a rock and I feel very grateful for that.

Q: Beautiful. Gina, unless there's anything else?

Q2: No. Thank you for letting me sit in. It was really wonderful to hear this.

Q: Yes, on my end, lovely to talk about it.

Sarabhai: As I say, I'm sorry if it was too digressive, but it's all I can tell you. [Laughs] And it's all— Yes, it's when something becomes part of your skin, it's not separate. And so it's a bit like when you lose someone, the maddening thing is that they're sort of—they're more present through their absence than they are in their—almost, in a sense, because you're always carrying

them with you. And sometimes that can be quite upsetting because you feel— But on the other hand, it's also fantastic that you do that.

Q: Perfect. Unless there's anything else, I guess for now we'll close up this record.

[END OF SESSION]

ADDENDUM

Retrospective Rauschenberg
by Asha Sarabhai

Birds there are
And tortoises
Mosquitoes
And cranes in flight
Curved bodies
Upright skeletons
Bare presence
Barely there
Of images
Transferred
Textures con-
Fused
Porous muslins
Gauzed organzas
Opaque densities of
Stark satins
Speaking bold colour
Blue and white
Propped by a bamboo pole
Reflecting reflexions
Skies and seas
Resounding Soundings
Urban Bourbons
That intoxicate
Vows to
Draw over and over
Trawl sea-beds
Land – and sky-scapes
For the multiplicitous
Proliferation
That abounds
Beyond our ken
Undaunted
To give space
And be endowed.

Transcription: Chris Kelley

Session #2 (video)

Interviewees: Asha and Suhrid Sarabhai

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Cameron Vanderscoff

Date: November 18, 2015

Q: This is Cameron Vanderscoff here for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project with Suhrid Sarabhai and with Asha Sarabhai. We're following up on your last session, Asha, but we're also going to be starting anew with you, Suhrid. Today I'd just like to start out by asking a little bit about your childhood in Ahmedabad and your early years there, and from there leading up through your education towards this visit that Bob Rauschenberg made in '75.

S. Sarabhai: Sure.

Q: So my first question—so you're from the Sarabhai family.

S. Sarabhai: Right.

Q: Would you mind just saying a little bit about your early education, your early childhood in Ahmedabad, just a few general notes.

S. Sarabhai: Well, we had school at home. And then the educationist Madame [Maria] Montessori from Italy was in India that time and she came and spent a year with my grandparents in Ahmedabad, in the Retreat where Bob worked. And as a result of that a

Montessori School was started. She said that if India is becoming independent, then it would be nice to start a good school. So my aunt [Leenaben] Leena [Sarabhai] Mangaldas and my mother Mani Sarabhai started a Montessori School called Shreyas [Foundation, Ahmedabad], where we studied since '46, '47, about the time of independence.

Q: At this time, how old were you?

S. Sarabhai: I was six. My older brother Anand, who invited Bob later, was nine—three years older.

Q: So having a Montessori education then, was that a different sort of thing than other young people your age would have been receiving?

S. Sarabhai: There were other children in the school apart from us. But yes, of course, very different. The child was left much more on their own to discover things. They were not taught into codes. There were no exams. And there was a lot of emphasis on the arts and music and self-help: cleaning the classroom yourself and cooking meals and cleaning up. It was very different. The Montessori movement became a very big movement in India, in education after independence.

Q: And it started there with your family, with this school?

S. Sarabhai: It had already started in Pune, which is near Bombay [Mumbai]. And when Madame Montessori and her son Mario [Montessori] came to Ahmedabad and stayed in my grandfather's house, which is now the Sarabhai Foundation and the Calico Museum of Textiles, my aunt and my mother wanted to do something. India was becoming independent after 150 years of British rule. And she said, "Start a school and we will help you."

A. Sarabhai: They were sort of there because as Italians they were actually enemies.

S. Sarabhai: They were under house arrest.

A. Sarabhai: That's right, they were sort of under house arrest.

S. Sarabhai: By British—

Q: In the war [World War II].

A. Sarabhai: Yes, that's right.

S. Sarabhai: Well, in the last couple of years of the war, they were in southern Maharashtra between Bombay and Goa, placed under house arrest by the British. And when the war ended in '45 and they were free to move, my grandparents invited Madame Montessori to come and spend time. And so we went on a holiday to Kashmir together with Madame Montessori and her son.

Q: And so given that we're here today to especially talk about your relationship with Bob Rauschenberg, I'm curious as to what sort of introduction to art you received at the Montessori school? You mentioned that that was a component.

S. Sarabhai: Well, it was actually my aunt, my father's younger sister [Gira Sarabhai], who is still alive. She is ninety-three. And she is looking after the Sarabhai Foundation, which was the foundation started by my grandparents, her parents, and which houses the Calico Museum of Textiles and also the collection of art of my grandparents. She was one of eight siblings, the youngest, and the eldest [Mridula Sarabhai] was born in 1911 and didn't want to study except in universities started by Gandhiji in Ahmedabad. All the universities were modeled on the British, sort of Oxbridge [University of Oxford and University of Cambridge] and Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts] and Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut]. And [Mridula Sarabhai] said, "I don't want to study in a university modeled under British ideas of education," so she went to that university in Ahmedabad. The next was my aunt [Bharati Sarabhai] who went to Oxford and then my father [Suhrid Sarabhai Sr.] who died very young at twenty-eight. He also went to Oxford. And then the next one, the lady who started the Montessori School, Leena went to Santiniketan [Visva-Bharati University], which is a university started by [Rabindranath] Tagore, the poet, outside of Kolkata [India]. After that was my uncle [Gautam Sarabhai], who went to Cambridge, and then another uncle [Vikram Sarabhai] who went to Cambridge, and then my aunt Geeta [Sarabhai Mayor], who was a great friend of John Cage and David Tudor and that group in New York.

But the youngest said she wanted to study history. Not oral history, but history, and the history of India. So at the age of seventeen or eighteen she went to Kashmir, took bags full of history books, and stayed in a houseboat. They moved the houseboat on the lakes and the rivers, and that's where she read history. When she came back, she wrote to Frank Lloyd Wright to say that "I would like to study architecture and be in your studio," and he said, "But you have no background." She said, "That's precisely why I would like to come. I would like to come to you and work with you." So she did. She came across I think in '47 or '48 and worked with Frank Lloyd Wright in his home. She watched him work as an architect, like an au pair kind of person. And when she came to New York, she and her brother Gautam Sarabhai and Geeta were the first friends of Bob Rauschenberg in New York. I'm talking about 1948, '49, '50, that kind of period.

Q: Interesting. And so they got introduced through Frank Lloyd Wright or do you have a sense of how that—?

S. Sarabhai: I think, I may be wrong—but Gira would be a good person for you to at least send me a questionnaire and I can try and get a hold of that information—but I think she met Isamu Noguchi.

A. Sarabhai: It may be Isamu Noguchi, I think.

S. Sarabhai: And I think Isamu Noguchi introduced Gira Sarabhai to Bob and her elder sister Geeta Sarabhai to John Cage.

Q: So this is all happening at the same time.

S. Sarabhai: In the late forties.

A. Sarabhai: Around the same time.

S. Sarabhai: When we were eight or nine or ten in Ahmedabad, this was happening in New York.

Q: So when you were quite young, your family is already visiting New York and starting to meet some of these people who will later return to India in the sixties and seventies to visit.

S. Sarabhai: Particularly Gira and Geeta, those two. The others were kind of Cambridge and Oxford and that kind of scene—the other end of the Atlantic. But Gira and Geeta came to New York, and their elder brother Gautam came. And the three of them, but I think Geeta more with John Cage and David Tudor and Merce Cunningham and that sort of group, and Gira and Gautam with Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper [Johns]. [Note: Rauschenberg and Johns met for the first time in late fall 1953.] So they were part of that group at that time.

Q: So for you then, coming up were you much aware of these people and their art, which is to say Robert Rauschenberg or John Cage or Johns?

S. Sarabhai: No, no. But when we came abroad, as we did with my mother in 1949 to look up our friends. So that's how we met. I met him first when I think I was eight or nine in New York, and then they would show us around. It was nothing to do with art.

Q: So what do you remember of those early visits here to this city, especially with Bob?

S. Sarabhai: Bob? I don't remember very much at that time, except meeting him. But I do remember John Cage showing us around New York and all the sights of New York. Not Merce, but John and David Tudor I remember and Isamu—particularly Isamu. He took us to the United Nations building when it was built to show us a sculpture that he had made for the United Nations. Actually, I think I remember Isamu Noguchi more than Bob for us as children.

Q: And so we're going to continue to follow these points of intersection, but just for a little bit of context, if you could share—so your aunts and uncles chose many different routes for their education. There was the Oxbridge route. I remember you saying last time, Asha, that you went to Cambridge. Is that correct?

A. Sarabhai: Yes. And Suhrud did as well—quite a few years before I did, he was there as well.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, we're all very much of the Cambridge mold. [Laughs]

Q: And so for you going through Cambridge, what did you study there then?

S. Sarabhai: I studied natural sciences part one and social anthropology part two. You can combine any two subjects. You can do mathematics and philosophy or whatever.

A. Sarabhai: But it's much more specialized than the system here in the early years. But you can switch from a science subject to an art subject later on if you want to, or from languages to social and political sciences, which is what I did as well.

Q: So you go to Cambridge and I'm curious then about the context of your family's expectations for you?

S. Sarabhai: There were none.

A. Sarabhai: Oh, come on, come on.

[Laughter]

S. Sarabhai: Expectations of me?

A. Sarabhai: Sorry. [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: There were none actually. We went to this Montessori school until we went to Cambridge and it was my mother who took the initiative in applying for admission because at that time it was not as difficult as it was now to get admission. But we got admission. My aunt,

Gautam's wife, was already at that time living in London and she was being trained as a psychoanalyst at the Tavistock Institute [of Human Relations] in London. So that was the other connection through my uncle Gautam and his wife Kamalini [Sarabhai] towards psychoanalysis and Anna Freud and the Freud setup in the U.K. So no, there were no expectations. No one said that because the family had a business you should go do engineering or get a business degree—not at all. Do whatever you find interesting and have a good time.

Q: Because of course, through all of this, the family has this association with mills, right?

S. Sarabhai: Had, traditionally.

Q: Yes, which will be quite important once Bob visits in '75.

S. Sarabhai: The family's connection with the Calico Mills goes back to 1880 and then up to 1947, when we became independent. They had some businesses in East Africa and they had an office in New York in Rockefeller Center here and in London. Then after independence they diversified from textiles into pharmaceuticals and chemicals and advertising and a whole lot of things in what was called the Sarabhai Group at that time. So that brought also my uncle [Gautam] here quite a lot, those business reasons, apart from the fact that he was friendly with many of these artists here.

Q: And so how long was it then before the artists started coming back to visit you in Ahmedabad?

S. Sarabhai: Well, it started as a result of that interaction in 1948 or '49 that my aunt Gira invited [Alexander] Calder to come and work in the Retreat. And Calder and his wife came in 1955. And I remember outside our—we didn't have a house at that time, but we were living with my grandparents. So the tree, he built a bench and brought the piano wires, which he uses in mobiles, and said, "Come and help me." And so plying and bending wires— We were young. I was fourteen and my brother was seventeen. So the first artist to come and actually work in the Retreat was Alexander Calder at the invitation of Gira.

A. Sarabhai: Sorry, am I correct in thinking that that was after Ray and Charles Eames visited indefinitely in their Nehru exhibition [*Jawaharlal Nehru: His Life and His India*, 1965–66]?

S. Sarabhai: No, no, that was after.

A. Sarabhai: I thought they came in '54.

S. Sarabhai: Maybe, maybe about the same time. [Note: Ray and Charles Eames created the India report for Jawaharlal Nehru in 1958, among other projects.]

A. Sarabhai: I thought they came in '54 when there was a Nehru exhibition that they did. And then there was a discussion about setting up the design institute in Ahmedabad [National Institute of Design, founded in 1961 with Gautam and Gira Sarabhai playing central roles in its establishment].

S. Sarabhai: That was much later—that was later.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, but that was sort of fermented at that point?

S. Sarabhai: You see, India was independent.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, it was just post-independence.

S. Sarabhai: It was secular, democratic, had a very well-drafted constitution, and it became the great interest of people from the States, from Japan, from Europe, as an experiment, as an idea, of so many diverse people, diverse languages, cultures, food—

A. Sarabhai: And a democracy—

S. Sarabhai: —and a democracy.

A. Sarabhai: —as opposed to China, which was at that point the People's Republic of China.

S. Sarabhai: So in the fifties, my mother wanted to build a house. Firstly, when India became independent, it was a very tragic thing, and Lahore, which was the capital of Punjab, went to Pakistan. So Punjab needed a new capital. So Nehru invited Le Corbusier to come and design the new capital. And as Le Corbusier was coming there and had an office in Chandigarh [India], my

aunt Gira told my mother— And by this time, that generation was already married or had live-in partners and had children, so they were moving out of the family house. So the Retreat, which was a large estate, was then divided between some sons and daughters. Some wanted to move out. And so she said, “Why don’t you invite Le Corbusier to come and design your house?” to my mother.

A. Sarabhai: Because she was about to build a house.

S. Sarabhai: She wanted to build a house and Le Corbusier was coming there, so Le Corbusier then got commissions to do five buildings in Ahmedabad. One was my mother’s house, which we live in, where Bob came and stayed—my mother’s brother’s house, another cousin, the museum, because my mother’s brother was the mayor of Ahmedabad. And Le Corbusier came—and I don’t know whether you remember the [Douglas] DC-3? The one-engine, sort of sloping plane, which had—



Le Corbusier, Villa de Madame Manorama Sarabhai (1951), Ahmedabad, India, photographed in 1961. Richard Langendorf Collection. MIT Libraries. Photo: © Richard Langendorf. License: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0

Q: Yes.

S. Sarabhai: He came in one morning from Delhi without a portfolio, without his work. None of them had heard of him. And then the next day when he went back, he had five projects from Ahmedabad. So if you want to talk about contemporary people, architects like Le Corbusier in the early fifties in Ahmedabad to build these buildings, then Calder, then Charles and Ray Eames came to make a proposal to the government of India for an industrial design institute so industrial products in India would have a design input, which would make them more acceptable abroad for exports and so on.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, but for India as well.

S. Sarabhai: But a lot of people—[Allen] Ginsberg came to Benares. Yoga, Hinduism, Sanskrit, Indian music, Yehudi Menuhin came, and then the Beatles came in the sixties.

A. Sarabhai: That wasn't the—

S. Sarabhai: No, it's all that—it's that period.

A. Sarabhai: Yes.

S. Sarabhai: It's that ten, fifteen-year period from when India became independent to mid-sixties.

Louis Kahn came to design a management school in Ahmedabad [Indian Institute of Management]. It was a period of great excitement.

Q: So the particular visits of these artists to your family and vice versa are taking place in this whole context of intercultural exchange, international exchange in architecture and art and music.

S. Sarabhai: That's right. And Ahmedabad, which was predominantly a textile and industrial city—it used to be called the Manchester of India—through these various happenings became much more an educational, art, architectural kind of center.

A. Sarabhai: Science-based as well, yes.

S. Sarabhai: Which it is today as well. But it started off by really—the early ones were Calder and Le Corbusier in the early fifties. Isamu throughout, because he loved India. He used to say, “The U.S., Japan, and India are my three homes.” Isamu used to say that. He knew India extensively. My aunt Gira would travel with him. They would go to fairs, go cycling, and that kind of thing. So it was really as children before university and during our time at Cambridge that we used to meet these people through the family. Through the family—not through great interest in art. [Laughs]

A. Sarabhai: But I think what was also—

S. Sarabhai: Just as family friends, as family friends; it was as simple as that.

A. Sarabhai: But what was interesting at that moment in time also was that these particular sort of encounters and visits of people who were coming and doing things there, it was a completely different slant from the image of exotic India and the maharajas and everything that had been there previously and which some people sought to keep going. But Nehru and the whole vision of a modern India was actually really coming to fruition in many ways. And I think this was all part of those exchanges. Not consciously, but it helped change some of the imaginings of India, which people kept wanting to go back to. But this helped resist that, which is a very constructive and positive side of it as well.

S. Sarabhai: But my aunt, for example, Geeta came to New York to study music at Juilliard.

A. Sarabhai: That was her intention, yes.

S. Sarabhai: To study music.

Q: This was in like '48 or '46?

S. Sarabhai: '49, '50. And she had an apartment in the hotel where we had tea—

A. Sarabhai: The Carlyle.

S. Sarabhai: The Carlyle, she had an apartment there. And Isamu had a party for her.

A. Sarabhai: She got a tiny attic room, I think, at a very low cost and she loved it.

S. Sarabhai: And he had a party for her, Isamu. And she said she would come to it and he had introduced her to John Cage. And she said, “I have come here to study music at Juilliard. My father has sent me.” He said, “No, no, you can’t go to Juilliard. You can teach me Indian music and I’ll teach you Western music.”

Q: And so that’s the seed for—?

S. Sarabhai: That’s how they started. So as children, we met all these people either in India or abroad. When we were at Cambridge for example, John Cage and David Tudor won a mushroom competition in Germany and they got the prize of a Volkswagen minibus. So they came to Cambridge, very happy that they had gotten this Volkswagen minibus to meet us. It was like that.

Q: You’re continuing to see these people through your college years?

S. Sarabhai: Through school and through college. And at that time, when we were at college, for example, Charles and Ray Eames had already come to India and then he was giving a talk at the Royal College of Art in London. And he said, “You must come over.” We were not part of the

Royal College. But these people were constantly coming to London, knowing that we were at Cambridge, and friends, children of the family, they would get in touch with us and take us out and see that we had a good time together.

Q: And so in the context of these larger exchanges, I understand that Bob Rauschenberg's first visit to India and to Ahmedabad was in '64 or so with the Cunningham—

S. Sarabhai: With the [Merce] Cunningham [Dance] Company, the around-the-world tour. And that's right. So I was there, very much there at that time.

Q: And so by this time you were done with—

S. Sarabhai: With Cambridge.

Q: —and you were back home working?

S. Sarabhai: Back home in '62 and working in the family business when Merce Cunningham and John Cage and David and Bob, they all came and gave performances in Ahmedabad, in Bombay, and Delhi. These were the three places on their around-the-world trip. I think it ended in Japan.

Q: And did you have a chance to see any of these performances?

S. Sarabhai: Yes, of course, the one in Ahmedabad.

Q: So that's in '64. So what are your memories then of that visit or of that performance, which is coming from, of course, a very different and avant-garde tradition of dance?

S. Sarabhai: The performance—the audience was polite.

[Laughter]

S. Sarabhai: But I think one of the pieces was in silence, where they don't perform at all.

A. Sarabhai: Cage's piece [4'33", 1952].

S. Sarabhai: Yes, it was totally dark, the auditorium. I remember my grandparents also came and the whole family. And Merce then danced. One of my aunts [Mrinalini Sarabhai], who was married into the Sarabhai family, is a well-known Bharatanatyam dancer from south India.

A. Sarabhai: Classical dance.

S. Sarabhai: She and Merce Cunningham then improvised and had a dance piece together as well at that time, at that same time when they came.

A. Sarabhai: But in any case, when she moved to Ahmedabad when she got married, she set up a dance school for the performing arts called Darpana [Academy of Performing Arts]. At that point

in time it was very unconventional and people didn't send their daughters to learn how to dance because that was seen as something that was not done by good girls—that kind of thing. But she was able, in time, to establish it as quite an important center and it still continues to today because her daughter [Mallika Sarabhai] has taken it on. And her daughter then acted in Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* [1989] and stuff. So she's very active in all these issues. And I think she sort of enabled the space, didn't she, when Cunningham and them came?

S. Sarabhai: No, no. It was in the town hall, a big town hall [Mangaldas Town Hall]. They had difficulty in getting a piano for John, not realizing that he was not going to play it at all. And they had this great concert and I remember that Bob made a painting for us at that time using the local magazines, which we still have at home. That was the first time I really met Bob and then David Tudor became a good friend of my mother's.

Q: So he made a painting out of local newspapers?

S. Sarabhai: Magazines.

A. Sarabhai: Something called the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, which is— [laughs]

S. Sarabhai: And he, using some kind of chemical to transfer an image onto paper, made a—it's very nice.

A. Sarabhai: It's a small painting.

S. Sarabhai: It's in the Le Corbusier house.

Q: And for that visit, did they stay at the Retreat?

S. Sarabhai: They stayed with us; all of them stayed. Because my grandparents' house is quite large. They had eight children and so they built it so that each one and his family could have an apartment. It's a very large building designed by an architect from Santiniketan [Surendranath Kar], from the Tagore university in Santiniketan. They all stayed with us, I remember that distinctly.

Q: So you have this large and influential family with diverse interests. When it comes to the art of Bob Rauschenberg—so starting with this piece and of course there's many other pieces later from *Bones* and *Unions*—was this art that made sense for your family or that your family connected with?

S. Sarabhai: They loved it.

Q: Because obviously some members would have—

S. Sarabhai: They loved it. My aunt [Gira], of course, introduced us to that. Absolutely. It was not done with any idea of collecting or to have a Rauschenberg piece. It's that they liked the work and they liked the person, so it made sense to work together and do something exciting.

Q: And so you don't think there was much of an interest in collection, in the mode that there might be with someone here?

S. Sarabhai: If it results in a collection, yes. But the purpose of having a piece is not like a collector's at all—not at all. Even today it is not. I think that's what we were discussing earlier before the recording began about the whole commercial aspect of art and galleries.

A. Sarabhai: I think one of the primary interests as well was the exchange of ideas and the fact that there was a fluency between ways of trying to think about things and that you didn't feel that there needed to be a dichotomy between the traditional and the new; that it all could merge in some sort of way.

S. Sarabhai: Between art and craft.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, they were ways of doing and making, rather than making art in a big—I think that was one of the primary things. And I think Gira herself, Suhrid's aunt, was very excited when she was in New York and felt very involved in the kind of ferment of things that was going on. And she once said to me not very long ago that she loved being here. And I said, "Well, why didn't you stay?" She said, "Well, I was afraid that if I stayed, I would never come back. And so I thought I'd better not."

[Laughter]

A. Sarabhai: So she said, “I said to myself ‘Why?’” And I said, “Well, you could have said to yourself why not?” But I think she was really worried that she might actually get so involved in what was going on that she could forget her family.

S. Sarabhai: But I think that your project and the Rauschenberg Foundation must get her to talk.

Q: It sounds like she has a perspective on the whole through-line of it.

S. Sarabhai: Charles Eames called her the greatest designer in the world. That’s quite a compliment. [Laughs]

Q: That’s a good place to start, yes. [Laughs] So we’ve talked about this visit in ’64 and that Bob made this piece that’s a part of this growing group of pieces that you have, going back to Calder. Are all these artists who are coming through leaving pieces behind or—?

S. Sarabhai: Calder came to make mobiles at the invitation of my aunt. And it was cold in Europe and America, and he was looking forward to getting away from that. And he also made some nice earrings for the family and that kind of thing. So he left it all behind. He didn’t take away anything. Then the other artists, Bob, I think my aunt and Gautam’s family have many pieces and many paintings of Bob’s, but also other artists, and the Calder mobiles they have. But it was never really so precious. It was just nice things to have in the house. It was nice and you knew the people and there was warmth. And it was more that, rather than art art.

Q: Right, with a capital A. So of course, our main topic here is Bob's visit in 1975. So in that time between '64 and '75, I found a little bit of correspondence from various family members—from your mother, for example. And so I'm curious then, is there some missing episode between '64 and '75 that we should talk about here? Either seeing him in New York or some correspondence or was '75—

S. Sarabhai: I did not, but my brother [Anand] did. My brother was a molecular biologist and he did his PhD at Cambridge after his undergraduate work. He worked with Francis Crick, the discovery of DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid].

Q: DNA.

S. Sarabhai: And Watson was there. The Medical Research Council [MRC, Cambridge] was a very exciting place to be in and he had a partner at that time called Hildegard [Lamfrom], who was from Caltech [California Institute of Technology, Pasadena] and she was working at the MRC. So they came to America after, I think, in the sixties, '66 or '67, and were in Portland, Oregon and at the Salk Institute and so on. And then my brother started meeting, but that I don't know—I'm not aware of that because I was in India. But my brother in New York started meeting not only Bob, but I think also the others, John Cage and David Tudor.

Q: Yes, there's a lot of correspondence from when he was in La Jolla that I found.

S. Sarabhai: That's right.

Q: So for you then, this next point of intersection is in '75. And so I'm curious then—and at this point we're increasingly talking about areas for both of you, because you were married in '74?

A. Sarabhai: No, in '68.

S. Sarabhai: In '68.

Q: Oh, you were married in '68.

S. Sarabhai: 1968 we got married and then Sanjay was born in '70?

A. Sarabhai: No, '69.

S. Sarabhai: '69.

A. Sarabhai: And our youngest son Samir was only a year and a half when Bob came, I think. He was born in '74.

S. Sarabhai: He's in many of these photographs.

A. Sarabhai: He was born in '74 as a very chubby baby. He doesn't particularly like seeing those reminders. [Laughs] But that was when Bob would have his Jack Daniel's and say, "Do you want a sip?"

[Laughter]

A. Sarabhai: Which he took very happily.



Rauschenberg working on *Unions* series (1975) with Asha and Samir Sarabhai in the background, Sarabhai Retreat, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, www.gianfrancogorgoni.it. Courtesy: Suhrud Sarabhai

S. Sarabhai: It happens, as you know, quite accidentally, this visit—

Q: The visit.

S. Sarabhai: —of Bob's. He telephoned my brother, not realizing that there is a ten-and-a-half-hour time difference between New York and India. And so he woke my brother up at two

o'clock in the morning and said, "Would it be possible for us to come?" I think they were planning—

A. Sarabhai: They were supposed to be going to China, I think.

S. Sarabhai: —to do that project in China or Japan? I'm not sure.

Q: I think it was Japan.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, Japan.

Q: Because he did go to China at one point.

S. Sarabhai: And he said, "I don't want to do that," and that, "I would like to come, if you can make arrangements for us to work in a handmade paper unit through Gemini." So my brother then confirmed to him a day or two later that they were happy to allocate the whole production line without disturbing the rest of the work that they do. And that is what it was—I think in May that they came, if I remember correctly.

A. Sarabhai: Which is really the hottest time of the year.

S. Sarabhai: And a large, large group. Because Bob knew India quite well, he told them this is the height of the summer and it will be forty-five degrees—

A. Sarabhai: And up.

S. Sarabhai: —and if anyone as much as complains once—

A. Sarabhai: Mentions the heat.

S. Sarabhai: —about the weather or the heat, then he'll be on the next flight back home. So if you came, you came to enjoy the project and to realize it, but not to complain about the heat.

Q: So you've had by this time [the present] quite a few artists come through the Retreat. Had other artists come through and asked for some sort of access to the mill? Either in this case we're talking about the paper mill, but of course there's also the Calico [Mills].

A. Sarabhai: Prior to Bob's visit, no.

S. Sarabhai: No. After Bob, yes. But Bob was a pioneer.

A. Sarabhai: He was really the generator.

S. Sarabhai: The pioneer after Calder—

A. Sarabhai: Calder never worked with the paper.

S. Sarabhai: No, but as an artist coming to work. In fact, even before Calder, Brancusi came.

A. Sarabhai: But not to Ahmedabad.

S. Sarabhai: No, not to Ahmedabad. To Indore and the Bauhaus house, designed a palace for the Maharaja of Indore. And then you have Calder and Corbusier and then of course Eames and so on. So as artists go, I think that after Calder, it was Bob who came to work there.

Q: So he comes in and did it seem that he was coming in with much of a plan that you understood? What did you know about his hopes or what he wanted out of this work beyond this industrial line in the mill.

S. Sarabhai: My brother was the main person in the family who would coordinate with Bob. And I think that the only thing that was clear was that he wanted to work with handmade paper, rag paper, and the pieces which are made out of earth and cow dung and—

A. Sarabhai: Tamarind seed and fenugreek seed—

S. Sarabhai: —came later, while he was there. And then bamboo and the string—

A. Sarabhai: And textiles, I think, became very much a part of it—

S. Sarabhai: Textiles, yes, very much.

A. Sarabhai: —because of the exposure there too.

S. Sarabhai: It was not the intention originally. It was just restricted to the paper.

Q: I'm interested in that because you've [Asha] worked with textiles and then you've [Suhrid] had an association—at the time, were you associated with the Calico Mills?

S. Sarabhai: Yes, absolutely. I was working there.

Q: So I'm curious then about your perspective on that textile side. I'm curious about your observation about Bob and textiles.

S. Sarabhai: Haven't you seen that wonderful photograph of him wearing a dhoti and everything in it? So I think it just was—India of course is a fabulous place for textiles. And I think that after the *Bones* and *Unions* project in the Kalam Khush paper mill, handmade paper factory, they thought of working— It was a very large group of people so it was difficult to coordinate. Work started late morning or early afternoon and went on until late at night. There were two crates of Jack Daniel's, which the customs people objected to in their arrival in Mumbai.

A. Sarabhai: He managed to get them through.

S. Sarabhai: He managed to get them through. And Bob and I think Bob Petersen—Sachika, I'm not sure—but Bob and Bob Petersen stayed in the Retreat, in my mother's house, Corbusier's house, where my brother was staying, and Hildegard. That's how you'd see them all. But work really started after lunch.

A. Sarabhai: But the paper itself, at the paper mill, was all rag paper. It was actually all from cut-up rags as well.

S. Sarabhai: Entirely.

A. Sarabhai: So textiles were very much involved right from the beginning in a way.

S. Sarabhai: That was the whole idea of Gandhiji, to start a unit making paper out of rags, without any chemicals, without anything added. So that's wonderful paper. And many of the artists who come since Bob first came often write to us to send them that paper because they find it so nice to work with.

A. Sarabhai: And I think I probably mentioned, but I think Gemini had it tested and apparently completely without all the scientific sort of paraphernalia, the pH of it, they had worked it out so that it was absolutely spot on apparently to what the requirements were anyway. But that was how they made the paper anyway.

Q: For preservation and the archives.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, that's right.

S. Sarabhai: I don't think that all the work that was done was planned or conceived in the States before Bob came. The paper ones also, I'm not sure because the textiles that were—it's not possible to plan a project in a completely alien country and culture. And Bob was very familiar with that culture so he may have had some ideas in his own mind as to what he wanted to do, inserting the bamboo and the fabrics. But I think that many things changed when they were there.



Robert Rauschenberg
Box Cars (Bones), 1975
Handmade paper with bamboo and fabric
34 x 26 1/2 x 3 inches (86.4 x 67.3 x 7.6 cm)
From an edition of 31 published by Gemini
G.E.L., Los Angeles

A. Sarabhai: And a lot happened through interactions, both with the actual craftspeople who were working there, and with people like Manu, who, I think he—

S. Sarabhai: And my brother.

A. Sarabhai: And Anand, yes.

S. Sarabhai: My brother, who was a very kind of scientific person, but very involved in the arts and full of ideas. So I think that he and Bob, they made a good team.

Q: So I'm curious for the two of you, you have your routine; you're raising two young children, including one that is very—

A. Sarabhai: You can't have a routine when Bob's around, thank goodness, which is great.

[Laughs]

Q: So I'm curious about that. So what then happened to normal living?

S. Sarabhai: I was working in the family business so I couldn't spend as much time. My brother spent all his time with Bob throughout. Not only Bob, but the other artists who came after Bob as well. And Bob loved having people, including children and dogs, because we had dogs in the family.

A. Sarabhai: But he also was happy to set everyone to work, I think. If you were there, you helped with the making. It wasn't as though it was, "I am the artist and you pass me the paints or the paper." You actually make as well, which is what was fantastic.

S. Sarabhai: And my job was to do the documentation through the photographs. Gianfranco was there doing his photography. So I could only do that in the evenings when I came back from the office. So many of the photographs I've sent here to the Foundation are taken by me.

Q: Yes, I have a couple of them here actually.

S. Sarabhai: But typically it would start after lunch, late morning or after lunch, and go on until late at night. So the children would have to be put to sleep at home and then go back, if you're asking about us.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, but we used to usually have dinner together and then go back once they had gone—I would go back.

S. Sarabhai: The children would come back from school, then it's, "Let's go to the studio and see Bob working." So we would go there, "Will you have a Jack Daniel's?" that kind of thing. And then the children would have homework to do so we would go back. We would be in and out. The constant factor was my brother. And then throughout this, apart from drinks, my mother was very fond of food; Bob was very fond of Gujarati vegetarian food. So food would be served and it was a party.

A. Sarabhai: But I think they also all yearned for some chicken at various points. [Laughs]

Q: So this was vegetarian?

A. Sarabhai: It's all vegetarian.

S. Sarabhai: Entirely. My mother was horrified because Sachika killed a peacock.

Q: Could you say a little bit about that?

S. Sarabhai: She was horrified actually, really, because she had said and Bob had—

A. Sarabhai: I think we can skip that episode. [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: —but Bob had also told everyone, apart from being vegetarian, about non-violence, respecting all forms of life. And so anyway, that happened.

Q: What led to him killing the—?

A. Sarabhai: It was after Bob and Bob Petersen had gone off to Kashmir, to Delhi and Kashmir.

And I think it was just Sachika being Sachika. It was a kind of a dare thing in his own head.

S. Sarabhai: We have lots of peacocks; they're wild. Nothing to do with us, but they're wild in that area.

A. Sarabhai: They just fly in and out, and they're in the garden. And for some reason he decided that that's what he's going to do. And he, rather like a poor turkey, he roasted it in the oven at Mani's, which was even more horrific than he'd done it.

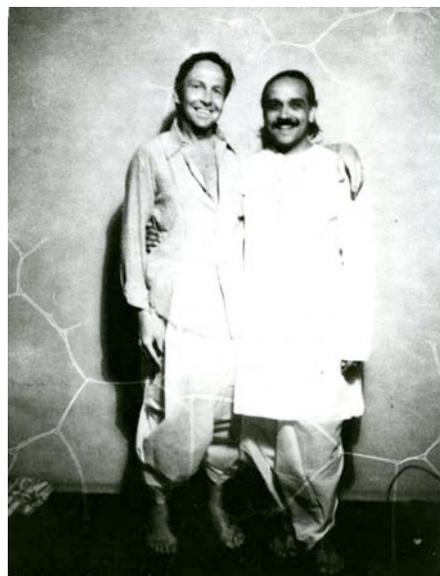
S. Sarabhai: But anyway, it was just that kind of thing. It was vegetarian.

A. Sarabhai: It was just an unfortunate episode. [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: Bob loved Indian clothes, so you would see many of the clothes there.

Q: And the dhoti.

S. Sarabhai: And the dhoti was worn and the kurtas borrowed from my brother sometimes or from me. And it was like having a house guest and having fun doing things. It was not a project, maybe, but while it was happening, during that time, every day was wonderful. It was really enjoyable.



Rauschenberg and Anand Sarabhai, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photos: Suhrid Sarabhai

A. Sarabhai: And for the fabrics, I think he was interested both in going to the Khadi shops because again, the mill was all Khadi, which is handspun, handwoven. At that time it was still a reality; it isn't very much today. But he loved going to the Khadi shops and pulling out— We would get them to pull stuff out from all over. And there would be wonderful things, both the cottons, but also the nonviolent silks, which were where you allow the cocoon to emerge, the moth to emerge, without actually boiling the cocoon. So that he loved. And a lot of the things—I think I may have mentioned—that went into *Jammers* came from the Bengali saris, which had a main body of one color and often a border of another color.

S. Sarabhai: One of the photographs is of a sari that I showed to you.



Robert Rauschenberg
Mirage (Jammer), 1975
Sewn fabric
80 x 69 inches (203.2 x 175.3 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Rauschenberg, Anand Sarabhai, and
Sidney Felsen looking at fabrics,
Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph
Collection. Robert Rauschenberg
Foundation Archives, New York.
Photo: Suhrud Sarabhai

A. Sarabhai: And the other thing he loved was going to the secondhand markets, where there would be piles of either fabrics or clothes, which were being sold and resold. And so picking up just bundles from there was another treasure source for random fabrics.

S. Sarabhai: Nothing is ever thrown away. Everything is always recycled and reused, including fabrics. And so it would be this kind of routine. And in between have a swim in the pool. There's a wonderful photograph of Bob, I don't know that you've seen it.

Q: The Gorgoni?

S. Sarabhai: He's floating in the pool. So it would be swimming, there would be dogs, there would be children, there would be people helping with the project, and of course the group that had come from America coming and going out—that kind of thing.



Rauschenberg floating in a swimming pool at the Sarabhai Retreat, Ahmedabad, India, June 1975. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, www.gianfrancogorgoni.it

Q: So there's the group that's come over from the States, and there's you all from the family. So who else is involved? There are workers, of course, at the mill.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, workers, both in the studio— Carpenters were involved. Textile tailors were involved. The people who made the handmade paper at the Kalam Khush factory, the Gandhi Ashram factory, were involved. And so Bob said at the end of the project that let's have a party. We had an exhibition in our house—not in the Corbusier house—of all the work that was done. It's an old colonial house. This ceiling reminds me of our ceiling. Ours is about half or three-fourths of that. [Note: Referring to the four-story chapel at 381 Lafayette Street, New York.]

A. Sarabhai: Yes, it's probably up to the black beams and then this goes up.

S. Sarabhai: So there was an exhibition and everyone was asked from the different, from the Kalam Khush workshop, and from our studio. And then there's the group photograph in front of the house.

A. Sarabhai: Of the people who were involved.

S. Sarabhai: So those are the people who were involved.

Q: So with Bob at the center of all of this, do you remember him—we talked a little bit about this last time—but do you remember him giving instructions? How did people—?

S. Sarabhai: My brother was there to interpret what Bob wanted to do.

A. Sarabhai: But he would often do it himself, just through asking or showing. He had very good rapport with people even without the language. I don't think the language was a real barrier.

S. Sarabhai: Bob Petersen helped Bob. And I think my brother acted as the interface, if you like, between what Bob wanted to do and getting it done.

Q: Like translating into Gujarati, I suppose?

S. Sarabhai: Translating it into Gujarati. But also my brother was full of ideas. He passed away a year and a half ago, but he was full of ideas and loved—

A. Sarabhai: Experimenting.

S. Sarabhai: He loved experimenting and making mistakes and learning from mistakes. The closest encounter in terms of work, according to me, on that project was between Bob and Anand Sarabhai.

Q: And I have a couple of photographs here, which might be a little bit helpful for some of what we're talking about. There's just a photo of everyone working at a table.

S. Sarabhai: That's right, this is outside the studio. Outside the studio, we have a big table.

[INTERRUPTION]

S. Sarabhai: This is a photograph on a table outside the studio. You see the studio in the background and this was just out there. It's exactly like this, even today. So this is outside the studio in the Retreat. This was a rag-mud—

A. Sarabhai: Making those mud pieces. In order to see that they lasted and stayed and didn't disintegrate, that was when they were experimenting about what different elements needed to go into them. It involved quite a lot of people in the discussion actually. And that's when the fenugreek and the tamarind seed and all the other elements came into it. Which helped to congeal it in a sense and keep it.

S. Sarabhai: They were also then taken to the Calico Mills and fumigated and dried because the Calico Mills had a horizontal thing with a belt on which the fabric would be dried after dyeing or printing or whatever it was. So we asked them to allocate again one line to us so that these pieces, after they were made, were transported to the mills to be dried and, as Asha says, fumigated.

Q: For the rag-mud—?

S. Sarabhai: Yes.

A. Sarabhai: The *Bones* and *Unions*, the ones that have the—and I think even when they were drying out, there was a real worry—I think I mentioned it—because of the humidity that was building up prior to the monsoon and the worry that fungus would start growing on it, which in some cases I think it did. [Laughs] So they had to really be dried very carefully. But also the smell—rather than the fragrance—from them was so strong because of the fenugreek.

S. Sarabhai: But Bob loved fenugreek.

A. Sarabhai: It was quite overpowering.

S. Sarabhai: One request from India was a spice that we make using fenugreek and chili, which you have on toast. And he loved methi masala, that was one request from him.

A. Sarabhai: Sorry, was there a question about the photograph?

Q: No, no.

A. Sarabhai: That was just everyone working on it, I think.

S. Sarabhai: That's at the handmade paper mill after the pulp is made using the rags, which are shredded. It comes into this. And these trays, this line was given to us, so then with a bucket it's poured into the tray. And Bob would then insert whatever he wanted to insert in there, bamboo and fabric and others. So this is at the handmade— Many of these workers are still there at the mill. They come from Bihar and eastern UP [Uttar Pradesh] and they're still there. We go to this mill quite a lot still.



Two workers, Anand and Suhrid Sarabhai, and Rauschenberg working on *Box Cars (Bones)* (1975), Kalam Khush paper mill, Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, www.gianfrancogorgoni.it. Courtesy: Suhrid Sarabhai

Q: So you have a lot of people who work there for their whole working life then? We're now talking about forty years since that photo.

S. Sarabhai: I know. So these people were in their twenties, but they're still there. They all recognize us when we go there.

A. Sarabhai: A few, some of them are still there. And there's some elderly—

S. Sarabhai: Because it's wonderful paper—it's really wonderful paper.

Q: Do you have any sense about what any of their impressions were of this visit?

S. Sarabhai: Curiosity, I think. Curiosity.

A. Sarabhai: But they were quite cool about it too.

S. Sarabhai: Bob was very—

A. Sarabhai: Respectful of them.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, absolutely, completely.

A. Sarabhai: And very respectful of the space.

S. Sarabhai: Respectful of everyone who helped.

A. Sarabhai: There was no question of going in and taking over; it was, “I’m working in your space.” And he did it very quietly, very calmly. So it really wasn’t disruptive.

S. Sarabhai: And with great humility. And Bob was really fantastic in terms of his interaction with the craftsmen who worked with him. He was really fabulous, fabulous in terms of—not polite for the sake of politeness, but just naturally he was just such a gracious kind of person. He really was.

Q: And I think the other thing that seems to be emerging in these photos is this sense of how really everybody got pulled in in some way. So you took photographs and there are other photographs of you, Asha, molding the mud.

A. Sarabhai: I loved it, actually. It was wonderful to be involved in the making of it because you would just— Everyone was doing what was being done. It was really good fun.

S. Sarabhai: It was quite contagious, that whole excitement. When you went to the studio at that particular moment of time, you couldn’t just sit back. And Bob did not mind people coming there, but once you went there, you could not help but just roll up your sleeves. [Laughs]

A. Sarabhai: But I think that that was a nice thing; that he never worked as though he was, “I’m the artist and you can all come and take a peek and then go away.” It was, “Hey, come on, why don’t we all do this?” And it was very involving of other people—

S. Sarabhai: Very inclusive, very inclusive—

A. Sarabhai: —in a quiet sort of way.

S. Sarabhai: —of all ages, the children included. Nothing to do with grown-ups—everyone. If they wished to help, “Please do, do this.” [Laughs] It was really great fun.

A. Sarabhai: No, it was like when meals used to be cooked, I remember, in Captiva or even here on Lafayette Street. Everyone was involved doing something and it worked very fluently. It wasn't as though anyone was getting in anyone's way. And so he managed to somehow not create a situation where there were hesitations that you were treading on anyone's toes or invading their space or anything. That I think we talked about. It was this incredible generosity that he had, which was really generative in the sense of the word, really expanding outwards and involving people. And not only involving them, but actually bringing out the best in them, I think, or challenging them to bring out the best in themselves. Because he had no patience with someone saying, “No, that can't be done,” or “It can't happen.” He'd say, “No, but come on, let's try.” And again that was how I think the mud pieces—he really pushed to find a solution for how they could keep because everyone said, “No, they'll disintegrate,” or, “No, they'll go moldy,” or, “No, this will happen—” And he kept saying, “No, let's keep trying.” So I think it was the never giving up part.

S. Sarabhai: Also he I don't think could stand bureaucracy of any kind. And I remember when he was there working in the studio— In India we have a system of when you send post—just like you have a registered post—when that post is delivered to you, you're to sign a book that you received it. My aunt sent some communication to Bob with this book, which he was supposed to sign that he received that communication. And he said, "No, you can take the book and communication back. I'm not signing any piece of paper that I received." He was so impatient with bureaucratic kind of people who would spoil the fun of doing this. It was really most enjoyable having him at home as a guest, but apart from that, just working together, photographing, whatever.

Q: And the interesting parallel to that is so you have that whole spirit of creation, and of course when you look at this art it involved a family; it involved workers; it involved a factory for the paper; and it involved the factory for this fumigating process that you talk about. So there's also this huge apparatus coming into motion to make this stuff.

S. Sarabhai: Which my brother put together once he knew Bob was coming, and once, after they had arrived, it was clear what they wanted to do. He was very good at that, and Ahmedabad is a small enough place, even today, to be able to organize something if an artist wanted to come and work. It is still a large village in many ways; its mentality is that of a large village, and everyone tries to help each other.

A. Sarabhai: I think there, again, people will try. They don't like saying, "No, it's not possible." So the answer to "Can we do this?" is usually "Yes, we can."

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: As you were saying?

A. Sarabhai: I think it was simply that people— It's true that in a smaller place, people will usually, if you say, "Is it possible to do this?" there will be a willingness to try to find ways of doing it and to help out. Which is how these things became possible as well, on the one hand by Bob not giving up and on the other hand by people saying, "Okay, I know somebody who knows something about this." So you can always find someone who is an expert on tamarind seeds and what they do or fenugreek seeds and what they do. So I think it worked very well given the scale and the size.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, but the question of Bob giving up never arose really because if there's something that needed to be done, it's a small enough place to see that time doesn't get wasted. Because they were there for a limited period of time and then they of course all went to Kashmir to celebrate after the project was over.

Q: So you saw these pieces come together for *Bones* and *Unions*. So what did you make of the final products personally?

S. Sarabhai: Personally, I like them very much. I like them very much and also the other ones, the ones which were made with the mud. I think that also because we participated in the making, there's a special bond. But no, we have some at home in India.

A. Sarabhai: We felt very special having seen them being made. Apart from having been involved, just seeing the whole process of what went into it and having been part of the process.

S. Sarabhai: And the caring with which they were made, it was very just—

A. Sarabhai: The only thing I still don't like is the smell of the fenugreek when it comes out.

[Laughs] I never have done, but that's just a personal bug that I have.

Q: So it's interesting that you use the word caring because it seems that with Bob's art that he was so caring and at the same time so open to change and even the piece really being changed in some way.

S. Sarabhai: The two can coexist, caring and change. And not only caring about what he was doing, but also with the people, I think that was the most important. He was really wonderful, wonderful to work with and for not only me. Everyone was happy during that time and it was very contagious, his enthusiasm and his kind of energy once he started.

A. Sarabhai: But I think the other thing that, in a sense, right the way through the time certainly that I knew Bob, it was very—you don't think about it at the time. For instance, he had a

voracious appetite, but it was not greed; it was an appetite that was really about nourishment. It was really about nourishing not just himself and his art and everything, but everyone through it. So it was again, a very generative thing and very generous in its own way and I think that was very striking about him.

I've been thinking about it recently. I don't know whether there's an element of this Southern combination of graciousness and his way with people. He could have a flash temper, but it was great because in that temper it said what he felt or thought without hiding behind form and formalities. But at the same time, he was never rude. There was always a kind of grace and gracefulness in the way he interacted with people, which you couldn't resist. There was something—and then there was the smile, which was in his eyes, which again was irresistible in many ways. So it was a very—I don't know how else to put it—it was a very bodily thing. He was very present, both in the way he interacted with you, but also in the making of things. And that somehow continues in the work when you see it. It doesn't end. It's as though that combination of the body that actually made it somehow has an afterlife, which to me is very striking actually. Sometimes when you look at a work of art you almost have to try and make it come alive. But I've never felt that with most of Bob's work. Whenever I've seen it, it's just felt as though that presence is incredibly impregnated in the whole thing. And that to me is a very striking part of who he was as an artist and as a person.

And I think it was the person that preceded the artist always and therefore it was never a dichotomy; it was as one. And I think that was certainly something one felt. I still feel it when we see the pieces that we have of his in the house. I see it when I even just fleetingly walk

through [the gallery at 381 Lafayette Street] coming to the chapel. I didn't have a chance to stop and look at things, but I wanted to because it felt as though he is here. It's hard to put it into words, but it is something that I think he was incredibly successful at doing and it was right through the range of the different materials he used, through color, through everything. It was a complete idiosyncratic allowing of space and time to enter in and to be able to be communicated.

And I think that was partly—again, going back to the religion thing, I think it was a capacity to connect the most disparate things and people, both in his work and in his interactions with people. So that whether it was someone working in the Gandhi Ashram in the paper mill, even without the language there was a connection; or whether it was Samir, who was a year and a half and didn't know art from mud essentially, there was a connection. And it's very heartening when you see that in someone.

I know it really changed my way of thinking, not just about art, but about life and people. It had a very important part in my life—again, not consciously because it wasn't until many years later. And in fact, you never think about a person in those terms necessarily when they're alive. It's actually often after they're gone that you begin to wonder why it is that moved you so deeply, both their going and their being there. So for me, it was a very important part.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So you just mentioned religion and that was before we were on camera. And we're here in the chapel at 381 Lafayette, Bob's studio and residence, now the home of his foundation. So if you would just mind saying [for the record]—?

A. Sarabhai: What we were saying earlier about the chapel was that I don't—I've never thought of Bob as an orthodox—if anything, a complete opposite of orthodox religion. And certainly I've never had any orthodoxy as far as religion is concerned at all, but I don't think that negates the fact that I think that, strangely, it's very interesting that he bought a place which had a chapel as a part of it. And I think he loved this space, if I remember correctly; I think to him, the chapel space—because again as I remember it and it was a long time ago—it was the first space that he brought me into when I first came to Lafayette Street. And I always have thought of him, in retrospect, as someone who in many ways was deeply religious in the etymological sense of the word religion, which was about linking with oneself and with others so that religion was very much about connecting and a community rather than about a god out there. I think it was really about living as a shared community, respecting each other—but the etymology of the word is connecting and yoking. I think it's *yug*; it comes from *yug*, which is about yoking. And as I said, I think it's also linked to ligaments. It's what keeps us moving and going.

And I think in that sense, he was an incredible embodiment of that capacity and capaciousness to do that with and for people in many ways. And it was certainly something that was very apparent from when I first met him in India and right the way through, both the encounters that were planned and through chance encounters that we had. There was never a sense of disconnection; it

was always reconnecting or connecting or whatever. So I think that's where the chapel becomes in the best sense a hallowed space really. But I don't know—do you have any idea? [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: No, I think it was the humanity, this caring that you were talking about, and this gentleness and fun. Everything that—I don't know that religion has anything to do with it, according to me.

So it was a great project and then at the end of it everyone went to Kashmir. Asha went and I stayed back because of the children, but Anand and Hildegard and I think Bob Petersen went. I'm not sure about the Gemini—did Christopher [Rauschenberg] come?

A. Sarabhai: Christopher I think came back actually.

S. Sarabhai: Maybe, because that was before the troubles in Kashmir started. So they had a houseboat and had a great time. And that was the end of that project, which was in the summer of '75.

Q: Right. And as you say, that project ends in '75 and Bob comes back to the States. And of course one of his very next big projects is *Jammers*, which uses all these textiles that we've been talking about.

S. Sarabhai: And a lot of them were acquired during that time, when he came.

A. Sarabhai: A lot of the fabrics.

S. Sarabhai: The silks.



Rauschenberg with fabrics, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Suhrid Sarabhai

A. Sarabhai: I think most of the wide-bodied ones that he used with strong borders—very plain, which was what was lovely about them, so it was really color and space and composition—I think most of those were Khadi-sized, that we bought together in the Khadi shops. So it was very nice to see them come into another life in a different space again, because when they were bought they were just these folded up bits of fabrics from the piles in the shop. And then, suddenly they're opened out.

S. Sarabhai: And then we spent time with him in Venice after that—

A. Sarabhai: Yes, that was almost by chance.

S. Sarabhai: —five or six years later. He was in Venice at the [Belmond Hotel] Cipriani.

A. Sarabhai: No, I think that was much—I think in '78 I came to New York and then stayed here at Lafayette Street for a while and then went to Captiva, which I think we talked about—I can't remember.

Q: We talked about it only briefly last time. So I'd like to hear about Venice and I'd like to hear—

A. Sarabhai: I don't want to in a sense repeat myself. Bob said come to Captiva and he asked Sachika to travel with me. And we were supposed to get there in the early evening and then the flight got delayed because there was a storm or something. And it kept getting further delayed and further delayed and he would keep ringing and saying, "What's happening, what's happening?" because he had prepared a wonderful dinner. And we actually finally didn't get there until half past three in the morning. And he was wonderful because he came to the airport to pick us up. And then we went back and then he said, "Do you want me to drive you around the island?" So I said, "Yes, that would be wonderful." So we drove around and actually saw dawn come in and again it was just magical actually being there and seeing all that vegetation and all the spaces that he clearly loved so dearly himself. His dog Laika was there and the whole thing was wonderful. So that was in '78.

Q: And you mentioned earlier that you felt this continuity between these different spaces with him— It wasn't like he was in a different mode when he was in Captiva versus New York versus the Retreat.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, because he inhabited the space. So he, in a sense, made the space even though the space obviously had a very strong resonance in itself. And having dinner upstairs here [at 381 Lafayette] was a much more intimate kind of thing because the whole space was smaller so people were much physically closer than say they were in Captiva, where there were much larger spaces available. But it was very much him who made the space, I think, and then everyone did stuff around it. And then sometimes there were flash tempers [laughs], understandably. But also I think the other thing that was very impressive during both the time here and in Captiva was that work time was work time and that was non-negotiable. So he was very committed to the time that was spent in the studio and it was only after, it was really like after hours, when the making the dinner and the partying and everything else happened.

So it was very impressive to see the discipline with which he worked on a regular basis combined with the enjoyment that he took both with the outdoor spaces, say in Captiva, and the plethora that was growing there, all the various plants—but particularly the datura plant, which he loved very dearly. And then the enjoyment of the cooking and making things that were actually delicious.

S. Sarabhai: But discipline in a very light-hearted way. It was not discipline which was—it was taken very—

A. Sarabhai: Discipline as a positive thing, I don't mean it in any negative sense at all. I think the discipline was—this is something I've found over time— If you would talk to people, the

inevitable thing about Jasper Johns and Bob Rauschenberg would come up and everyone would say, “But Johns is a much more disciplined person in his work.” And the implication was always that somehow Bob was all over the place. But I think that even if that were the case—which I don’t believe it was—I think he had a very clear idea about what he was doing and why. But I think it was part of his generosity that actually was inclusive and that wanted to cover every possibility and every range of material and doing and visual impact.

That’s something else I think I learned from him, that making choices often has to exclude by necessity. And of course you inevitably do make choices because you then compose it into something that, at a given moment in time, stops. But he seemed to be able to do it in a way that it didn’t actually stop; it continued in the way you were then able to see it or receive it. But I think it was, to my mind, that voraciousness that we talked about in terms of appetite, it was very much a part of the work, that everything he saw had possibility in it. So his eye was very giving as well as receptive, I think. And I think that was something that was amazing.

And to me it was always a very false premise of trying to distinguish—they were two very different artists. And whatever anyone else may say, to my mind—and it’s not a prejudice—to me, he was a greater artist or is the greater artist because of the range and the sensibility and sensitivity with which he saw as he saw and then translated. I think that, again, the great thing with Bob is that you never felt that he had this sense that, “I’m making art.” It was as though, “I’m making a space to allow life in and what I do best is paint or do something.” So I think that he— And in many ways, that goes back to that whole bodily thing. It was from him that it emanated, but it was also his capacity to take in what surrounded him—

S. Sarabhai: Completely, completely.

A. Sarabhai: —that was brilliant. And to my mind, that's a great artist if anyone is. [Laughs]

Q: And so you mentioned a couple of times, temper? Is there an element of intensity, temper?

S. Sarabhai: Temper was like saying if it's very hot and if you complain about it, you can go back. And then it was forgotten. It was not—

A. Sarabhai: It was rare.

S. Sarabhai: The nice thing about those flashes of temper was that it was not an ongoing thing. It was there and then like lightning you continue with whatever you're doing.

A. Sarabhai: But also the temper usually used to come up if somebody said something can't be done. The temper was usually in relation to a negative response to something. And he'd say it, "Of course you can!" So he was very demanding, but in the best sense. He was very demanding. And it's strange because in a different sort of way—you met Lynda. I see it in Lynda as well. She has this incredible generosity as a person, but she also has this capacity to go completely wild if someone crosses her. And it's brilliant because you really know that she is who she is. She makes no bones about things, but at the same time—

S. Sarabhai: She was also introduced to us by Bob.

A. Sarabhai: Bob suggested her.

S. Sarabhai: She came as an artist.

Q: Well, she mentioned that she came in '79 at the recommendation of—his recommendation and Bob Morris's.

S. Sarabhai: To Anand, yes.

A. Sarabhai: But she has that same, again—and that's why I think I said it. I don't know if it's a Southern quality because I'm sure these things transcend that, but there is a graciousness about it in terms of attitude, in terms of respect, in terms of capacity to interact with various young people, much older people. There's something that seems to be—there was some link that I felt this time and I don't know whether it's my imagination or what, but it struck me that there was something there which I can't quite put my finger on. But it's a very impressive quality, whatever it is. [Laughs]

Q: And maybe we'll get a little bit more at that in the remaining, I think maybe we have fifteen minutes or we'll see, more or less.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Okay, so you mentioned visiting here and Captiva, so you have this ongoing relationship with him through correspondence. And so clearly there's a sense that his homes or his residences are open to you, that this one visit in 1975 has opened up this larger dialogue between people and opened these doors.

S. Sarabhai: The doors were open before that, before '75. I don't think that the project in Ahmedabad had anything to do— It just then happened. In the sense that having known Bob, if we were here [New York], he would of course have said— And we weren't here, but if we were here, he would have never said, "Don't stay with me." So I think that his doors were always open, since at least as far as I've known him. Not only his, but some of these other people that we've mentioned—John and David and Isamu, they're all like family members. Honestly, really like family members in terms of how close I think members of the family felt towards them and also vice versa, I think that they felt.

Q: And you have the opportunity to see each other all over the world, it seems like. So you were meeting here; you were meeting in India of course; and then in Venice, which you barely—you [Asha] mentioned it very briefly last time and you [Suhrid] just mentioned it. And I'd love to hear about Venice.

A. Sarabhai: That was in fact a chance encounter. The first time we went to Venice was— I think it was one of the Biennales. It must have been one of the art Biennales and he happened to be there. But we had just decided on a whim and I don't think we even knew at the time—in fact, I

know we didn't know at the time—that he was there. And we went with a friend of mine, Suhrid, myself, and the two children. And we were walking near the [Piazza] San Marco, because Bob was staying at the Cipriani, and we actually bumped into him. And it was absolutely wonderful. He immediately said, “What are you doing here?” And we said, “Well, we happened to—” And then he invited us to the Cipriani and we went with the children.

S. Sarabhai: He made the bath. He had a Jacuzzi.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, he immediately said, “You can have this huge bubble bath,” filled it up—

S. Sarabhai: So he made a bubble bath for the children.

A. Sarabhai: We had Bellinis, everything was— But it was just wonderful to be there at the same time. That was an unlooked-for opportunity to spend some more time with him. That was completely chance because the only other time, the next time that there was a—

S. Sarabhai: We went to Florida.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, we went to Captiva.

S. Sarabhai: We went to Captiva with the children.

A. Sarabhai: Yes. I was just going to say the next time, the Venice encounter, was sadly the memorial, when Christopher was there, when I did go especially for the memorial exhibition that they had at the Guggenheim there. [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: Gluts*, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 2009] But he, in his absence, was very, very strongly—even though his presence was there very strongly, his absence was there very strongly too at that time, which was a shame.

But yes, the next encounter was to Captiva.

S. Sarabhai: We went to Florida.

Q: And this was approximately—?

S. Sarabhai: I think it was '84 or '83? Early eighties. And we went to Orlando because the children wanted to go to [Walt] Disney World or whatever it's called over there. And then we went to Captiva.

A. Sarabhai: And again, he picked us up at the airport.

S. Sarabhai: And before going to his place, he asked the children—

A. Sarabhai: He said, "I want to take you to a supermarket."

S. Sarabhai: A supermarket. I remember that he and the children went around the supermarket—

A. Sarabhai: With this huge trolley.

S. Sarabhai: —getting every conceivable thing that they liked. Then we went and we spent—

A. Sarabhai: And he said, “You don’t have these in Ahmedabad.” [Laughs] And he was right. There are no supermarkets there.

S. Sarabhai: So he took them shopping and then we went there. We had again the same house.

A. Sarabhai: He gave us the birdhouse to stay in.

S. Sarabhai: Not the birdhouse.

A. Sarabhai: The Fish House, I think it was called. I always think of it as a birdhouse because of the pelicans flying past. You could see them from the window and you could see the stingrays and stuff because there was a kind of little jetty-type thing that you could walk out on and look down at the water. And it was just heaven being there. It was just so beautiful because you were surrounded by sea and sky and birds.

S. Sarabhai: And he showed us around that whole campus and where the printing was done.



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

A. Sarabhai: He got these inflatable jelly, baby-type mattresses for the children to float on in the water. And they loved it. And then he insisted that we take them back with us to India so they were deflated and then packed and taken back. And we had them for quite a while, but the swimming pool was too small. They were very large mattresses. But the children loved them. No, he was fantastic in terms of thoughtfulness.

S. Sarabhai: But also one-to-one with the children, not that it's Asha's son or nothing to do—just one-to-one.

A. Sarabhai: It was the thoughtfulness for what they might enjoy or what they might like and the capacity to guess that, to know where to come in on it so that they had a great time. It wasn't as though they felt they were having to be with the adults—

S. Sarabhai: Not at all.

A. Sarabhai: —and get bored. It was their time as well, which is lovely.

Q: Well, it seems like he had that ability to generate enthusiasm.

S. Sarabhai: Absolutely, to generate enthusiasm among the children, among grownups—

A. Sarabhai: Absolutely.

S. Sarabhai: —and in a very positive way.

A. Sarabhai: Because he enjoyed it, I think.

S. Sarabhai: He enjoyed it and he brought out the best in people in terms of positiveness. He couldn't stand this, "Oh, I can't do that," or "I can't do this."

Q: And do you recall him working on pieces during these subsequent encounters that you had with him?

S. Sarabhai: Venice, yes. He was making a painting for the Cipriani I think, as far as I remember. And that was one of the main reasons why he was there. But in Captiva, yes. I don't remember now exactly what he was working on, but he did take us to the studio there, into the various buildings there.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, I don't remember either just offhand. I'm sure it'll come back.

S. Sarabhai: He was very thoughtful about children's sleeping hours and, "Will they be comfortable?" and, "We must have milk for them." It was always very easy—very, very easy.

A. Sarabhai: I think the first time I went to Captiva it was the cardboard pieces, but I'm not absolutely sure. I could be wrong.

Q: And we can look into that and add footnotes into the transcript to that effect.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, I think it may have been those.

S. Sarabhai: And after that you went to Bilbao, isn't it?

A. Sarabhai: I went to Bilbao for the retrospective, which was great because he was very much there. And it was terrific, partly because again it seemed almost as though the space had been made for his work; it was very allowing. And he had that very long piece as you entered [*1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, 1981–98]. And I remember saying, "It looks as though it was built for that piece." And he said, "No, no, I tricked them and made it a bit bigger." [Laughs] So he also always had this wonderful sort of—well, wicked in the best sense. It was never malign, but there was always this, "You can't just have it the way you think it's going to be." There was always an element of surprise in what he did.



Installation view, *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–98) in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, 1998–99. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Erika Barahona Ede © FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao

I remember just seeing that retrospective, again being struck by how there was nothing that he hadn't done. It was as though he had touched— And I remember just thinking at one point, it must be really hard for young artists to feel that you— But then at the same time, you thought well, it's only hard if your obsession is with making it new. But if you realize that it can be about actually just doing it, assimilating things and synthesizing them in your own idiosyncratic way, that there's nothing which is totally original—it can't ever be, because everything has existed. But he had touched so much and incorporated so much in his work that it was very striking when you saw it all laid out. And most of it was also incredibly beautiful. I remember seeing, thinking *Soundings* was such a wonderful piece. So I kept standing there, just thinking one could take that in forever.

But what was also nice was it was also Bob's way of being so intensely personal. I had on a blue tie-dye scarf, it was quite a strong blue. And he immediately said, "That's an amazing blue." So I said, "Okay, it's yours." [Laughs] But it was very responsive to what was around him and to who

was around him and that really is seen in the work all the time, this incredible capacity to receive and to give—which, to my mind, makes him one of the greatest artists in a long time.

Q: And so was that the last time then that you saw him, at Bilbao?

A. Sarabhai: Do you remember what year the Bilbao retrospective was?

Q: I don't.

A. Sarabhai: You don't? I think it probably was because we talked then about my coming to the States. And originally I had hoped to come to the one in New York, which I didn't. And I think one of my biggest regrets was that I didn't come back until it was too late. So I think that probably was the last time.

Q: And of course, he wound up not returning to Ahmedabad, is that correct?

S. Sarabhai: Yes, that's right.

Q: But at the same time then, on the end of the Retreat, I know that you've continued and expanded, built upon this tradition of having artists come and visit?

S. Sarabhai: Through word of mouth. So Bob—

A. Sarabhai: He suggested—

S. Sarabhai: —after he came back, Lynda. Afterwards, with Frank.

A. Sarabhai: Frank Stella came in '77, yes.

S. Sarabhai: Roy Lichtenstein came. So just by word of mouth, we continue that.

Q: Now?

S. Sarabhai: Yes. In the absence of my brother, because my brother was the catalyst really. But yes—very much, yes.

A. Sarabhai: There are some younger artists. In England, there's a young girl called Phoebe Unwin, who is a painter who has been. I think I may have mentioned it [in the last session]. And then there's someone called Lisa Milroy—I don't know if you know her—who strangely has a great interest in textiles as well. So she's wanting to come next year. She's just written to say she'd be very interested in spending time at the studio.

S. Sarabhai: We would very much like American artists to come.

A. Sarabhai: It would be very nice, yes.

S. Sarabhai: But typically they would spend three weeks, four weeks, six weeks, that kind of timeframe to work there. And the artists who came after Bob left part of their work for the family and took back part of the—

[INTERRUPTION]

S. Sarabhai: It's nice to break away from the art scene here or in London or in Paris and to go away somewhere like Ahmedabad where you can really start working from tomorrow. It's all set up and all the facilities are there. From our side, they're most welcome, if we could have artists to come. It was very much a collaboration, all these projects. It was not like having an artist-in-residence or something.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So Ahmedabad being this place where you can go start anew that's outside of—for a lot of these people it's outside the existing scene of Lower Manhattan or very certain parts of London.

S. Sarabhai: And also galleries and the dealers, to get away from that. Art should be fun.

[Laughter]

Q: Right. So perfect—I think we've covered most or all really, of what I had hoped we'd cover.

So coming to a conclusion, here we are again at 381 Lafayette. We're doing this interview in this

space. And there's a quote from you [Asha] last time that I wanted to read, which was, "I think it is a real gift to be able to make someone see differently, think differently, be different in a way. That certainly, to me, was the most important part of the interaction that I had with Bob." And that's from the last time we spoke in the spring, one floor up from here.

A. Sarabhai: That's right. That's certainly something that I feel made a huge difference to me. And it was also to always, as I said perhaps earlier, it was to throw it to you to be capable of being your best self—not just in terms of the way you were, but in terms of what you are capable of doing. And I remember once when I was hesitant about something or worried about something and I spoke to him on the phone and he said, "Asha, what are we here for if not to disturb the world?" I think I may have mentioned that to you. And that was something that made me feel much—because I think sometimes you can be quite hesitant if you've not been—and I think America is actually very good for helping you not be hesitant, in the best sense. It really helps you be assertive, not in a way that is negative or seen negatively. And again, that's something I love about Lynda, that she's totally assertive—and with good reason. So yes, that was something that made a strong impression—not enough of an impact in a way. [Laughs] But I still hope there's still time. [Laughs]

Q: Perfect. Suhrid or Asha, if there's anything further you'd like to say in conclusion about the subject we've been talking about, feel free. And if not, that's fine as well.

S. Sarabhai: You must come and see the studio.

Q: I'd like that very much.

A. Sarabhai: I'd simply like to say that isn't it amazing that we can still be here, as you said, in this chapel, talking about someone who has made it possible to link people beyond his time or after his time? So in that sense, he continues to be very much there, in terms of what he has enabled and continues to enable, in a way.

Q: Beautiful. I think that's a great note to close on. With that, we'll close off the record—great.

S. Sarabhai: Great.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #3

Interviewees: Asha and Suhrud Sarabhai

Location: Ahmedabad, India

Interviewer: Cameron Vanderscoff

Date: November 21, 2016

A. Sarabhai: Have you been in touch with someone called Alexander Keefe?

Q: That name sounds very familiar.

A. Sarabhai: I got in touch with him independently because someone sent me a piece he'd written, which is very interesting, about David Tudor and people. I then afterwards saw that he also had been asked to do the introduction or the bit in the *Jammers* catalogue [Gagosian Gallery, London, 2013].

Q: That's why I know the name. I have—

A. Sarabhai: And he was quite interested in a lot of these, I think.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So I just turned on the recorder. For the record, it's Monday the 21st of November 2016 and this is Cameron Vanderscoff here for the Rauschenberg Foundation with Asha and Suhrud Sarabhai. We're starting out by just filling in a little detail about the '64 visit that Bob

Rauschenberg made. So you don't think it was *Winterbranch* that [the Merce Cunningham Dance Company performed in Ahmedabad in '64]—

S. Sarabhai: I don't know what the piece was called, but it was the one where there was silence. I don't know what that particular piece was called. But this has been written about, I assure you. A girl who came here, who had done research on this and then the final, not falling out, but the differences between Merce and Bob in Japan, she talks about that.

As far as I know it was in the town hall, which is in Ahmedabad, designed by an English architect called [Claude] Batley. A very nice hall. And there was a grand piano and it was the piece on complete silence.

A. Sarabhai: That was Cage's piece. I didn't know because I wasn't here.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, in Ahmedabad. As far as Merce is concerned, I'm not sure. I'll have to find out the dance that Merce did because it was not only—he collaborated with my aunt, Mrinalini Sarabhai. I'll try and get through my cousin—my aunt passed away, Mrinalini passed away a few months ago.

Q: Right, quite recently.

S. Sarabhai: Her daughter is still dancing—she's a dancer. I'll find out for you before you leave tomorrow any information about that Merce Cunningham visit and the dance performance that

he gave in Ahmedabad. So I really can't comment on that at this moment, whether it was this piece or any other.

Q: That would be much appreciated because actually the Cunningham foundation [Merce Cunningham Trust] doesn't have any notes on—

A. Sarabhai: They don't have accounts, how strange.

Q: Because your aunt was doing a Bharatnatyam piece, right?

A. Sarabhai: Yes, that's right.

S. Sarabhai: That's right, that's right.

Q: So they actually don't have any information, so I think there's definitely some interest.

A. Sarabhai: A gap, yes.

Q: Well, it's an interesting collaboration, certainly. So just as one final question, so I found this account of that visit in the book *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* [1997], which is written by David Vaughan, who was there in '64 and later became the archivist for the dance company in all that. He describes the arrival of the whole group coming in on a night train and being greeted by a military band like the one in Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* [1955].

S. Sarabhai: Yes.

Q: Yes. And of course they describe the Retreat as a Garden of Eden and just an extraordinary sequence of programs and events. And so I'm wondering what you recall of them showing up and whether you were at some of these welcoming events or these various evening events that it seems were held.

S. Sarabhai: No, no. I think it was, as far as John and David Tudor, maybe my mother—maybe the papers have some information on that—but it was more Geeta who was playing host to John and to Merce also, actually. I don't think that Merce and the company knew my aunt Mrinalini, but I remember all these names: Carolyn Brown and Steve Paxton and Viola Farber. I remember meeting them at that time, but it was really I think that Gautam and Gira mainly, and then Geeta and Mrinalini, their sister-in-law, for the dance part of it. But the rest, the hosts I think were Gautam and Gira Sarabhai and Geeta.

Q: And so they were here for a period of time and then they went over to Chandigarh for the next sequence.

S. Sarabhai: That's right.

Q: And there there's a description of Cunningham's dance performance, quote, "Whenever a man lifted or even touched a woman there were gasps. No doubt Rauschenberg's costumes

seemed like the equivalent of nudity.” And so you described in some of our previous sessions that the audience was polite here.

S. Sarabhai: Very polite, very polite.

Q: So I’m curious about your thoughts on that, on the reception to say in particular Rauschenberg’s costumes, this sort of costuming was received by you or by—

S. Sarabhai: No, no. I don’t think this idea of nudity is as alien in India. You see nudity all the time.

A. Sarabhai: On sculptures and stuff. No, but there is, there’s quite a strong—

S. Sarabhai: Not sculptures, even people.

A. Sarabhai: But that’s constrained. It’s part of the form rather than—nudity in terms of a midriff.

S. Sarabhai: No, the costumes that Bob had made for the dance company I don’t think either shocked the audience or anything. Not shocking, but the whole thing was such a surprise, to have an audience in conservative Ahmedabad responding to a concert which was in all silence and darkness. And that in itself was—I don’t know that the response was positive, but it was certainly not negative.

[Laughter]

S. Sarabhai: And they were guests and guests are treated with respect and all that so I don't think it was— By this time of course Corbusier had already been here and the National Institute of Design was being set up with Charles and Ray Eames. So the kind of people who were in the audience for these shows had already been exposed to some of these new movements and all that, so I don't think that—

Q: So at the time then, what would have been an example of typical programming in the Mangaldas Town Hall? What was this event space usually for?

S. Sarabhai: I can take you there. It's used for concerts, for drama. And as I said, this architect, Batley, was commissioned to do that. There's a library next door. It's like any other town hall.

A. Sarabhai: But at the time it was used for performances.

S. Sarabhai: Performances, concerts, politicians' speeches. The difficulty was getting a hold of a grand piano. I remember because in Ahmedabad, it's no, no—in Bombay it would be much easier.

Q: And so yes, those were just a couple of questions there. If you could talk with your cousin that would be—

S. Sarabhai: He also did this piece that you saw upstairs, Bob did, based on a weekly magazine called the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. And I remember that we had to get special—you can't get high-octane aviation fuel, which is what he wanted, easily, so we had to get it from the airport for him to do that. I remember that distinctly because Anand was I don't think even here at that time, as far as I remember. He was in America. So it was either my mother or I who requested Bob, "Why don't you do something for the house?" And he said, "Get me lots of issues of *Illustrated Weekly* and leave me to it."

A. Sarabhai: You've seen that piece?

Q: Yes, I just saw it. And so he did that—

S. Sarabhai: At that time.

Q: But he wouldn't have been *here*, here [at the Corbusier house]. He would have been—

S. Sarabhai: Staying maybe in the Retreat in the big house. I think they all stayed in the big house, which you visited yesterday, the Sarabhai Foundation. [Note: The big house, where Suhrid was raised along with his siblings, has since been converted to a facility for the Sarabhai Foundation and the Calico Museum of Textiles.]

Q: Unless there's anything further on that, I'd like to fast-forward to the *Bones* and *Unions*. I've been talking with people at the Rauschenberg Foundation and really, the oral histories that we've done and knowledge and the stories that you've shared have been the richest source about those projects. There's not actually that much documentation—

A. Sarabhai: Oh, from the other people who were here at the time?

Q: There's some, but—

S. Sarabhai: I have documentation through photographs, which we'll show you.

A. Sarabhai: Which we've sent, I think.

S. Sarabhai: But also film, which I haven't seen myself. We just converted them into DVDs and we have a master. So once I see that, if there's something interesting I'll send it to you. The film of Bob working here is there.

A. Sarabhai: It probably would then be interesting if it's actually got him working here.

S. Sarabhai: As I said, I don't know. I haven't really—we've just been trying to—

A. Sarabhai: Maybe there's a chance to see them while Cameron is here.

S. Sarabhai: Let me see.

Q: Yes, that would be extraordinary.

A. Sarabhai: That would be nice if you can see them because then you can identify the spaces as well.

Q: So given the insights you have on all this, I do have some questions, just follow-ups about the media that Bob used, just to make sure we have this right. So we talked about the rag-mud and the idea that your mother had a structure in the backyard.

A. Sarabhai: It's a mud house, an earth house, if you like.

Q: And so we're curious about where Bob—

A. Sarabhai: Where he got the idea?

Q: Yes, exactly, if you can recall the genesis of that.

S. Sarabhai: It's used a lot here, that particular—

A. Sarabhai: —building out of earth and cow dung.

S. Sarabhai: It actually is being done at the moment at the farm where we have our offices and studios. We have a guest house and every so often, after four or five years, we need that mud plaster to be repaired, particularly near the ground level where the water and the rains falls, and the mud of course peels off.

A. Sarabhai: And it later came to be a plaster, but it used to originally—and it still is in certain cases—it was actually built, the structures were built out of mud.

S. Sarabhai: No, this is built. This is entirely built—it's not a plaster there. There are two ladies from the village who are doing it right now. I showed it to Lisa and she was fascinated. [Note: Artist Lisa Milroy was in residence with the Sarabhais at the time of this interview.] So maybe tomorrow, if time permits, I'll show you how it's done.

Q: I think when a lot of people think about Bob Rauschenberg they think about the newness of his materials, walking around Lower Manhattan picking up found objects and using these recent things. So this rag-mud, is this something that has a long history?

A. Sarabhai: It's really the rag paper. The mud-mud, it's not really got the rag bits in it. The rag paper is made from fents and rags of fabric.

Q: This is good, yes. This is a part of what we want to—

A. Sarabhai: And the mud is actually what was used in the building, which is a mixture of cow dung and earth and—

S. Sarabhai: Chopped up hay.

A. Sarabhai: Hay because it really is an insulation as well.

S. Sarabhai: And methi [fenugreek] was also added—I think methi was added also.

A. Sarabhai: It helps to insulate against cold and heat. It's very cool in the summer and it keeps the warmth in in the winter, which is why it was an ideal building material for places like Kutch, which is in the desert. So that really doesn't have the rag element in it.

Q: And so then we're talking about, I guess, three different elements as far as those raw materials go: we have the rag-mud, we have the mud-mud we call it—

A. Sarabhai: Mud-mud. So you call the paper—are you referring to that as rag-mud? No.

Q: So this is some information that the Foundation has on what they call the rag-mud. For example, *Capitol*—the piece *Capitol* from *Unions* is described as being of rag-mud. Is that—?

A. Sarabhai: I think that's a misnomer, personally, but I could be wrong because I think it may be a confusion of the rag paper, which is what he used a lot of as well, which is what was from

the ashram. You'll see how it is actually made up of these cut-up rags and that they basically get colored by the color of what the rags that they're using happen to be. So if they're predominantly reds and pinks, they'll get a kind of pinkish color. But that, I think, is a rag paper and I don't think the rag-mud really is related to it.

S. Sarabhai: No, there's no rag-mud.

A. Sarabhai: So I would call that a misnomer in a way.

Q: You would refer to this as—?

S. Sarabhai: It should not even be mud. It should really be earth.

A. Sarabhai: It's earth that is combined with these different elements, which they do mention. It's not—because there's no paper pulp in it. Do you see? That's why it is a misnomer. I didn't read that.

Q: That's interesting.

A. Sarabhai: So there's no paper pulp in it at all, but there is earth; there's ground tamarind seed in what was done with Bob. That's not necessarily in what was used in houses, to make the houses. And these were the elements that went into what Bob used. But probably the influence was from seeing its use architecturally in homes and in this little hut that we can show you.

S. Sarabhai: That little hut, but also Giraben's house.

A. Sarabhai: I was just going to say Gira's house is built out of it, yes.

S. Sarabhai: My aunt Gira has a house which is entirely made of mud.

A. Sarabhai: Which is an absolute sort of extraordinary piece of beauty.

S. Sarabhai: Would you like to see that?

Q: Yes.

S. Sarabhai: That I can arrange.

Q: Yes, that would be very interesting.

S. Sarabhai: That house is a beautiful house with nice—

A. Sarabhai: It's an absolutely lovely space, yes.

S. Sarabhai: —paintings done by people who she had invited to come from Bihar. I'll try and see whether tomorrow—

Q: That would be a pleasure.

S. Sarabhai: It's also now part of Sarabhai Foundation because she doesn't have a family, so she has given her house here and that mud house where she used to stay, which may have inspired this. Gautam's house itself was also—

A. Sarabhai: So he would have found it probably as a found object, as a seen object, having seen it used. You can see because it was also a three-dimensional thing that he could probably immediately translate it into his head and he was determined to achieve something that would stay and hold. And I think the addition of the tamarind seed and stuff was an attempt to try and make it more long-lasting in a way. Because Sidney Felsen and people were quite worried, I think.

S. Sarabhai: Was it tamarind or was it methi?

A. Sarabhai: There's methi also, but the tamarind was also supposed to give it holding.

S. Sarabhai: This is where my brother's scientific background came in. "Anand, I would like to use this. What should we do?" So he must have found out the best way.

A. Sarabhai: He asked various people.

S. Sarabhai: Like an experiment. That is where this collaboration between either Anand and Rauschenberg or other artists who had been invited to come. He was very good at that.

Q: So something like this [*Capitol*] then—

S. Sarabhai: That's right.

A. Sarabhai: That's right.

Q: If we look at *Capitol* from *Unions*, here, 1975, this would be that mud that we're discussing.

A. Sarabhai: Absolutely. And some of them had the paper.

S. Sarabhai: And the use of the silk and Khadi and the bamboo—maybe some of the bamboos were from the garden here. That then was before *Jammers*. This is where he was excited.

Q: Yes, to me that's very interesting because you think of his use of that sort of monochromatic cloth, the Khadi cloth, as being something that happens with *Jammers*. But here you can see that he was already taking in information.

A. Sarabhai: It's earlier, yes. And the fabrics were got at the time that he was here. I think many of the ones that were used in *Jammers* as well were from the fabrics that he bought and collected while he was here for this project.

S. Sarabhai: But also you saw the way that Khadi yarn yesterday—you can imagine how Bob would immediately feel excited, how from a piece of cotton wool you can spin thread using the hand.

Q: Yes, that was extraordinary to see yesterday at the Gandhi Ashram.

S. Sarabhai: And then what happens to that thread, how it is woven. So let's use Khadi, what kinds of Khadi are available—so Anand would bring various samples. “Let's use this fine Khadi or—”

A. Sarabhai: Yes, except a lot of this was actually, again, going back—you mentioned the found object. And I think a lot of this was also about just going to these shops—which as I say, were much more haphazard at the time—and just finding bundles and saying could we look at that please and could you bring that down? And some of them were completely abandoned creatures, but the pleasure was discovering. And I think he was particularly taken by the silks then. And that is much rarer now to get a Khadi silk because now they tend to be using filature from China.

S. Sarabhai: You know what Khadi silk is, where the cocoon is not boiled?

Q: Right, it's nonviolent.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, it's a nonviolent.

A. Sarabhai: It's nonviolent, but it's also the handspun. The Khadi was about the handspun and handwoven.

S. Sarabhai: Because the cocoon is not boiled, the silkworm escapes and the cocoon gets broken—

A. Sarabhai: It's nonviolent in that sense, yes.

S. Sarabhai: —then you have those imperfections built into the silk.

Q: Which is also interesting to think about for Bob, that sort of taking the imperfections—

A. Sarabhai: Sure, absolutely.

S. Sarabhai: Of course, very much.

Q: And so here in India, and especially in Ahmedabad, the historical resonance and meaning of—

A. Sarabhai: Of fabric.

Q: —of Khadi and the Khadi movement is very significant. Is this something that you recall having conversations with Bob when it came to that? Was this a found object with context for him or—?

S. Sarabhai: I don't think so.

A. Sarabhai: I think he overrode a lot of that, in the sense that I think probably even if it was there in the background, there was never a kind of— I think any commitments that came from his mind were human commitments. And therefore if there was a resonance in the Khadi, he would absorb it, if that makes sense. It wasn't a kind of commitment to, "This is a worthy cause." It was his particular transformation of it into something that excited him and he felt good about. Because there were conversations about various things, but it wasn't a Gandhian sort of attitude per se; it was just, "This is what gives me pleasure and what I feel strongly about." Because he did have a very ethical base and bias to what he did as well. But it was always internalized; it was never hearsay. It was something that went through him and came back in its own form or his own form of it. I think it was that more than anything really.

Q: And so I do have some more questions about the fabric, which we can get to with *Jammers*. But staying with *Bones* and *Unions* for a second, just reviewing the materials to clarify this. So this here, if you look at something like *Capitol*, this would be the mud—

A. Sarabhai: The mud.

Q: The mud-mud.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, absolutely.

Q: And so then what—

A. Sarabhai: The smelly mud because of the fenugreek in it.

[Laughter]

Q: So if you look at something like *Little Joe*, then we're looking at the rag paper.

A. Sarabhai: That's the rag paper, exactly.

Q: So we're looking at two materials here.

S. Sarabhai: Yes.

Q: So that's interesting because the rag-mud has just become something that's been used in some of—

A. Sarabhai: In some of the terminology.

Q: Yes, some of the nomenclature about this.

S. Sarabhai: I think the correct nomenclature would be either earth—it's not even mud.

A. Sarabhai: Well, mud mixture.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, it's a mud mixture.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, it's a mix. It was a mud mix.

Q: So then if you look at this list of elements right here, this would be accurate with the exception of there's no paper pulp?

A. Sarabhai: There's no paper pulp and there's no rags in it at all. Even though I don't think Bob was necessarily particularly worried about the possibility of disintegration of the material, I think Sidney and people understandably were. [Laughs] So I think this was an attempt to get it as long lasting as possible.

S. Sarabhai: No, I really don't know, but it doesn't mention mud at all, the mixture.

A. Sarabhai: Doesn't it?

S. Sarabhai: The description, no. Or it doesn't mention dung, farm manure.

Q: So maybe there's some sort of terminology crossing here then. Maybe one way to get at this, so if you were to describe the mud-mud, it's mud, it's earth, it's dung, it's—

A. Sarabhai: —he may not have used the dung bit because of the problems that might go with it in terms of leaving—

S. Sarabhai: Taking it back to America and immigration and customs.

A. Sarabhai: I think this was a mixture that emerged from being exposed, having seen how something like earth could be used in that way. And then this was an attempt to find a translation that was viable.

S. Sarabhai: No, but earth there definitely was, even if you see photographs.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, there was definitely mud in it with these various things added to it, but it may have skipped—

S. Sarabhai: Copper sulfate and things added to prevent insects.

A. Sarabhai: And the gum powder and stuff to have it hold.

Q: Because I suppose various batches of this must have been mixed up at different times in his visit.

S. Sarabhai: It was also not—what did you say, gum powder?

A. Sarabhai: Yes, there would have been a gum—

S. Sarabhai: It was guar gum.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, so it was a kind of gum powder. And I think it was also that, yes, they were actually shaped—he shaped them as well and everyone else helping him with it. So I think once it was there as a raw material, then it was made into these various things.

Q: But the term “rag-mud” to you all still seems—

A. Sarabhai: It seems to me not the right sort of way of naming it because there was no element of rags in it. It didn't start from the foundation of the rag paper pulp or anything.

S. Sarabhai: It's rag paper, for sure, for the other ones—the other ones are rag paper. You'll see in the paper mill when the pulp is made, whether some of the pulp was used—this is where my brother, as I said, came in to try and get it to a material mixture of all these things which would then stay over time and not get insects and not fall apart.

A. Sarabhai: When you go the ashram you will see the process beginning from the cut-up pieces of the rags that they then convert into the paper.

Q: This is actually a question directly from the Foundation. So the Foundation sent me here with this: we have this information about the rag-mud, which we're now problematizing the name of that. And then they don't have very much information about the rag paper.

A. Sarabhai: Which is actually what you'll see at the Ashram, which is actually lovely to see. You see these huge bales of cut-up rags, bits and rags cut in small pieces that have come in, and then you see how they take them through the various processes and end up with the paper. And it has a very different tensile strength to it.

Q: Right. And so if you were to describe the elements of the rag paper in the same way as this listing here—which we've since problematized—how would you describe the rag paper? So you use rags, chopped-up rags—

A. Sarabhai: Guar gum, I think.

S. Sarabhai: I really don't want to comment on it because I really honestly don't know, but I think it was maybe that pulp from the ashram, maybe mud, fenugreek I know was there, methi and copper sulfate and things to prevent insects. I'm not sure whether there's something called Fevicol, which is a kind of binder.

A. Sarabhai: That's a binder; that's a chemical glue.

S. Sarabhai: Whether it was used, they might have got the binder—they use a natural binder at the ashram.

A. Sarabhai: I think it was a gum powder.

S. Sarabhai: So before they actually started making those, these experiments were done as to what would be the most ideal thing to work with and then they started. I'm sure we have it here in the file. I'll look it up and let you know.

A. Sarabhai: Actually, yes, maybe we've got it wrong.

S. Sarabhai: Anandbhai's files I'm sure have—

A. Sarabhai: Maybe Manu would actually remember, no?

S. Sarabhai: No, I doubt it, I doubt it. Manu was so young at that time. We're talking about forty years ago.

A. Sarabhai: For a moment there you begin to think have we got it wrong in terms of whether it was actually the paper as a base? [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: It wasn't. That color—

A. Sarabhai: I don't think it was because I remember being involved in making it. But it was a long time ago.

S. Sarabhai: I'll find out. I'll find out before tomorrow and let you know exactly what.

Q: That would be great, yes. Because I think that's something—so we're trying to sort of put all these different sources, use some of the archival stuff from the time.

S. Sarabhai: And I'll try and find out.

Q: And we're just trying to find out exactly what the different—

A. Sarabhai: What went into—

Q: How many different sorts of materials we're dealing with. Because again there really is less information—because he produced this here as opposed to his home studio. And of course he did other things abroad, but for ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] he often went back [to the United States to work] and he had a whole really quite established documentary apparatus that was going with him for ROCI in a way that wasn't quite—

A. Sarabhai: Here.

Q: Yes, this was an earlier mode of that.

A. Sarabhai: It was much more hands-on and done [laughs]. And Gemini doesn't—

S. Sarabhai: Gemini may have it.

A. Sarabhai: Does Gemini have a record?

Q: Well, some of this—

A. Sarabhai: Is from Gemini.

Q: Yes, I believe it is. And so we'll have to reference that together. So the raw materials we're talking about here, so we have this mud, which is being drawn from this traditional building material.

S. Sarabhai: Mud, rag pulp, a binder. I would say maybe a little bit just to give it that—rather than water—to use that pulp, because when you take earth, you need something to hold it together. And the binder et cetera probably came from the ashram. I'd be very surprised if these experiments were done—it must have been done in half a day or a day. If Bob mentioned it to my brother and said that this was what he would like to do and then my brother—and I don't

think that copper sulfate because they were really worried about fumigation and all the immigration—

A. Sarabhai: At the other end.

S. Sarabhai: —and the importing difficulties in the U.S. So it had to pass all of that. And that's where my brother was—he was doing research in America at the University of Oregon.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, maybe they did use rag paper after all. [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: I'll find out from the papers here.

Q: Okay, perfect. We can clear some of—

A. Sarabhai: Maybe it's just gone down in folklore as mud, glorious mud.

[Laughter]

A. Sarabhai: Who knows?

Q: [Laughs] Yes, so we'll put those together. So there's that, then there's bamboo, which I assume must be being sourced locally as well.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, absolutely.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, local, absolutely.

S. Sarabhai: No, everything was sourced locally: bamboo, the silk, the Khadi, everything.

Q: And so then one question is that—and this will get us into some of your own pieces—but how you wound up with the particular pieces you did, if they were your favorites or if they were Bob's picks?

S. Sarabhai: No, it had nothing to do with favorites. I think that the understanding that my brother had with Gemini was that the pieces that were made here, the rag paper pieces which were actually made at the paper mill and then brought here to the studio, then the mud pieces et cetera—I think, if I remember correctly, they were divided into three lots: one that Gemini took back, one for my brother's family, and one for our family. Whether there were three lots or two lots, I stand to correction, but it was like that. It was not that, "Oh, you like this so you keep this and this I'm going to take back to America."

A. Sarabhai: No, but did Bob divide it or did Sidney? I would imagine Bob.

S. Sarabhai: No, no. It was a project with Gemini, who were going to do this I think in either Japan or China—

Q: Yes, Japan, actually.

S. Sarabhai: —and Bob did not want to go to Japan at that particular moment. And he telephoned my brother after having had lots of Jack Daniel's in the middle of the night—because Bob didn't understand the time difference of almost nine hours or ten hours—and said—

A. Sarabhai: No, but who made the actual—?

S. Sarabhai: It was Gemini. No, it was Gemini. I know for a fact it was—

A. Sarabhai: But Sidney would have decided how to divide it up or Bob?

S. Sarabhai: No, that was the basis of the understanding before Bob even came. Bob had nothing to do with it.

A. Sarabhai: No, I understand that, but I think what Cameron—what you're asking is who would have made the selection of—

S. Sarabhai: There was no selection made. There was no selection made. Everything that was done—

Q: It was predetermined, you're saying.

S. Sarabhai: Whatever was done, the understanding with Gemini was that all these things that would be made here should either be divided, as I said, either into two lots or three lots. So if that piece—where is that, the triangle [*Little Joe*]—

A. Sarabhai: But they weren't necessarily exact duplicates.

S. Sarabhai: Of course not, because the fabric was different—

A. Sarabhai: Exactly.

S. Sarabhai: But this piece [*Little Joe*], for example, the number that were made were either divided into half or a third. I think it was half.

A. Sarabhai: But who made the decision on which, if that had a different piece of fabric?

S. Sarabhai: Maybe my brother and Sidney. Bob had nothing to do with it.

Q: And so one other question. There's been some speculation about where all these names came from: *Bones*, *Unions*, and *Jammers*. And there seems to be some sort of difference: *Unions* seems to be more the mud and the *Bones* more the paper. And I'm just curious whether Bob every discussed these—

A. Sarabhai: The naming?

Q: Any of those names, yes.

S. Sarabhai: I don't remember.

A. Sarabhai: I think the names probably came later. But again, Sidney doesn't have any, Gemini doesn't—? I think they were later. I don't remember referencing to the names.

S. Sarabhai: I'm sure it was something that had the approval of Bob, whether the suggested name—

A. Sarabhai: I think he would have named them himself.

S. Sarabhai: —came from Sidney Felsen or my brother, I'm not so sure.

A. Sarabhai: No, I think he would have probably named them himself because he was very good at naming things. But at what stage, I don't know.

S. Sarabhai: No, but I remember—I don't really remember this particular naming very clearly, but Howard Hodgkin did the *Indian Leaves* and Frank Stella did the *Indian Bird* series because he was interested in birdwatching. And we went birdwatching together and he liked some names. So it was like that. But in Bob's case, because Gemini was involved as a printer or publisher, I think that Sidney Felsen and—I'm sure finally Bob must have been consulted about *Bones*.

A. Sarabhai: No, I think he would have actually named them and Sidney—

S. Sarabhai: I'm not so sure. It had his approval in any case.

Q: Well, going a little bit deeper into *Jammers*, I have here with me the *Jammers* exhibit book and so one thing that the Foundation and I were discussing is that we don't particularly have the eye to distinguish where these cloths were coming from or what style they might exemplify. And I believe you mentioned that Bob had a particular interest in Bengali—

A. Sarabhai: Well these are Bengali ones and those were the ones that caught his eye.

Q: Right. So we're curious, looking at these—let's see, we'll scroll through the annotation here [in the *Jammers* catalogue]. A lovely shot of Bob in the pool. We can see the exact spot from here. He had the right idea.

A. Sarabhai: There's the slide, yes. That's such a classic photograph, isn't it?

Q: Yes, the Gorgoni. So looking at these then, so far as you can tell, is everything that Bob used here, were they all Bengali saris?

A. Sarabhai: No. This is a Bengali Khadi sari.

Q: We're looking at *Mirage* [(*Jammer*), 1975].

A. Sarabhai: But that, I can't tell actually, but I think that probably is too.

Q: *Quartz* [(*Jammer*), 1976].



Robert Rauschenberg
Quartz (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric and rattan poles
115 x 66 x 36 inches (292.1 x 167.6 x 91.4 cm)
Private collection

A. Sarabhai: Do you know what the width is on that, by any chance? Does it give a width?

Q: I do not, no. It's strange that they don't.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, it's about 45 to 48 inches would be the width, generally—on the sari that would be the width. This, I don't know actually. I don't necessarily think it's even Indian, but I could be wrong.

Q: We're looking at Untitled [(*Jammer*), 1975], gingham.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, I'm not sure which one that is. You see, I'm not convinced that's a fabric from here at all.

S. Sarabhai: Well, it may have because they bought a lot of fabric to take back. It may have been fabric, but not made here [Ahmedabad].

A. Sarabhai: It's possible. It's a muslin—you can see that in that definition. It's a woven muslin, but I don't recognize that in the way that I do the saris. This again I think is probably not so much a sari as just a silk fabric.

Q: *Index* [(*Jammer*), 1976].



Robert Rauschenberg
Index (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric and cloth-covered rattan pole
90 x 100 x 24 inches (228.6 x 254 x 61 cm)
Private collection

A. Sarabhai: Yes, that he would have bought as yards of fabric.

Q: And these would be all things that would be here in the Khadi shops?

A. Sarabhai: Again, without—

S. Sarabhai: Because you see, apart from the staying in Ahmedabad and the celebration in Kashmir, they didn't go shopping in Bombay or Delhi or anything. So most of these must have been bought in Ahmedabad.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, but this—again, it's hard to tell without actually seeing it. But he did buy plain silk fabrics and plain other fabrics here as well. So it could well be that.

Q: So it's interesting then that some of these were in fact sari cloth and other of these were bolts of just—

A. Sarabhai: Yes and some were just bolts of fabric, exactly.

Q: And this is just using more of the bamboo and some string [Untitled (*Jammer*), 1975]. And if any of these elicit any comments—

S. Sarabhai: I'm also not sure whether the bamboo was sent from here or not. I'll check on that.

A. Sarabhai: For *Jammers*?

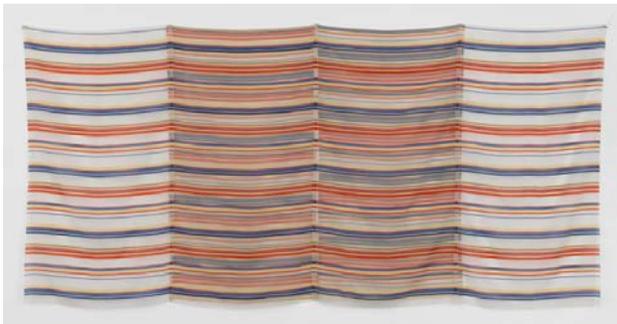
S. Sarabhai: Because he did ask. I remember he did say, “Why don’t you send this to America?”

So I think we may have.

Q: That’ll be interesting. It sounds like there’s quite a lot in the archives.

A. Sarabhai: See again, I don’t recognize that fabric so—

Q: *Gear [(Jammer), 1976]*.



Robert Rauschenberg
Gear (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric
82 x 172 inches (208.3 x 436.9 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

A. Sarabhai: So it could have been from anywhere because he had stashes of material as well.

Q: And I think that’s a part of our question about the sourcing of this: to what extent is he pulling this out of the closet at Captiva—

A. Sarabhai: Exactly, exactly.

Q: —and then what’s coming from here. And then we just don’t have—

A. Sarabhai: The documentation on that.

Q: Yes, to absolutely distinguish, “Oh this must have been, necessarily.”

A. Sarabhai: These I think were probably, again, Indian fabric.

Q: *Quarterhorse* [(Jammer), 1975].



Robert Rauschenberg
Quarterhorse (Jammer), 1975
Sewn fabric
59 1/2 x 168 1/2 inches (151.1 x 428 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

A. Sarabhai: Yes, from bolts.

Q: So you mentioned that the sari cloth in *Mirage* at least was in the Bengali style.

A. Sarabhai: Tradition, yes.

Q: So you can look at that immediately and distinguish that. What—?

A. Sarabhai: Because the white and the red—the red border with the white in that way is something that would often be used as a Bengali wedding sari in that tradition.

Q: We were looking at an example of one of those; you thought these perhaps— [shows *Mirage*]

A. Sarabhai: No, is there a white one as well? This is a yellow. It's a simple—a lot of the Bengali saris are very simple bodies and borders. Some of the borders are obviously more elaborate, but this was a version that the Khadi shop did, the Khadi people did, trying to use Khadi silk to make these saris and to keep it quite simple. So this was actually not a woven border.

Q: The red [in *Mirage*].

A. Sarabhai: It was a printed border, which in Bengal it could be either, but it would have traditionally been a woven border.

Q: But this might be an interpretation of it here in Ahmedabad.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, this is an interpretation, exactly.

Q: And so this you think would be sort of by the—

A. Sarabhai: I would think it's by the meter.

Q: *Quarterhorse*.

A. Sarabhai: Yes. But again, it may not necessarily be from India. It looks as though it probably could be, but without actually seeing the texture closely, it's hard to determine.

Q: More bamboo, *Caliper* [(*Jammer*), 1976]. It is interesting that he continued to work in the bamboo. You can see that whether or not this was in fact from here, he continued to hold onto these materials.



Robert Rauschenberg
Caliper (Jammer), 1976
Rattan poles with fabric
93 x 65 x 24 inches (236.2 x 165.1 x 61 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

A. Sarabhai: Yes, exactly.

S. Sarabhai: That's right.

A. Sarabhai: Well, because bamboo was everywhere, apart from the actual growth, but it's also used so much for scaffolding and stuff. At that time if you went around town you'd see a lot of bamboo.

S. Sarabhai: This is bamboo.

Q: Yes, we're 10 feet away from a bamboo screen and maybe 15 feet away from a stand of bamboo. So right, you can see it's just—

A. Sarabhai: And you'd see scaffolding which was made of bamboo.

S. Sarabhai: Bamboo, silk, very fine cotton, hand-spinning, hand-weaving, rag pulp, mud, farm manure—all these things. Why do something else if you come to a country like India? [Laughs] Why use other materials which you can get better there? So try and use whatever is locally—

A. Sarabhai: Again, I think this potentially was the yardage from bolts of fabric from the Khadi shops, but without actually seeing it it's hard to say whether it was Indian fabric or something he had, but it looks, I think this was probably from here.

Q: We're looking at *Brim* [(Jammer), 1976]. If they ever do an exhibit of it, it would be such a treat to have both of you—



Robert Rauschenberg
Brim (Jammer), 1976
Fabric, attan poles, and tin cans
93 x 130 x 26 inches (236.2 x 330.2 x 66 cm)
Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna
On loan from the Austrian Ludwig
Foundation, since 1981

A. Sarabhai: Be able to see—

Q: Yes, be able to look at the fabric and sort of comment on it.

A. Sarabhai: Because these were done in 1975, is it?

Q: '75, I think [and '76]. It was really quite promptly.

A. Sarabhai: Almost immediately, yes. Yes, so I would imagine that they were from the bolts of fabric because he did buy a lot of material. That again could well be fabric from here because of the—

Q: Untitled (*Jammer*) from '76, with a light, white—

A. Sarabhai: —what looks like sort of weft bars in the fabric, which would be very indicative of fabric that's woven by hand. Because a lot of different hands may be involved in the actual weaving of it, you get a lot more weft bars going on in that.

Q: And so the cloth that say Anand was bringing for Bob to see or the stuff that he was seeing out in town, would this have entirely been Khadi cloth or would any of it have been mill cloth?

S. Sarabhai: No, I don't think—

A. Sarabhai: No, not necessarily—no, mill as well. What's in that little triangle would have been probably from going to the secondhand markets.

Q: *Little Joe?*

A. Sarabhai: Yes.

S. Sarabhai: No, I'm not so sure.

A. Sarabhai: No, I think we did; I think I went with Bob as well, buying piles of fabric.

S. Sarabhai: I'm not so sure. I don't think that Bob—you may have gone once, but I don't think Bob—he may have gone out. But I think that at that time, if I remember correctly, it was really working here and things were brought here.

A. Sarabhai: No, but the Khadi shops we went to and we went to the secondhand market.

S. Sarabhai: Khadi shops you may have, the silk you may have—

A. Sarabhai: Yes, we went to the secondhand market.

S. Sarabhai: Which secondhand market?

A. Sarabhai: The ones near the—

S. Sarabhai: I don't remember. I have not a very good memory, but I don't remember going out shopping.

A. Sarabhai: Yes and I know that that piece came from that.

Q: In *Little Joe*?

A. Sarabhai: Yes, because they were much more random, those pieces. They were the size of what you got and what was available and the Khadi things were in a sense more uniform because they were what was already in the shop. But these were things that people exchanged and ended up in a secondhand market where people were selling them for other people.

S. Sarabhai: And they had all to be ready for inserting into the paper when it was being made. So all that process, the selection of whether it was this or— The paper, it's made in trays where the pulp is sifted. So we had to make special—I don't know what you call it—this shape—

A. Sarabhai: The triangle.

S. Sarabhai: —was made out of wood. The triangle was made to fit into the exact shape because the size of the tray is exact to exactly fit into that and then one layer was one bucket or half a bucket that was poured into that and then that paper was made. Then the bamboo—

A. Sarabhai: Strips.

S. Sarabhai: —thicker strips were inserted and then the paper was placed. And it had not to move for—

A. Sarabhai: The cloth was inserted too, yes.

S. Sarabhai: So all this selection was done before actually, because they allocated the whole line to us, because it affected their production. And that was the line where the experiments took place.

Q: And you would have had to customize some of these molds then.

S. Sarabhai: Yes.

A. Sarabhai: Oh yes, absolutely.

S. Sarabhai: Customize so as to fit into their trays.

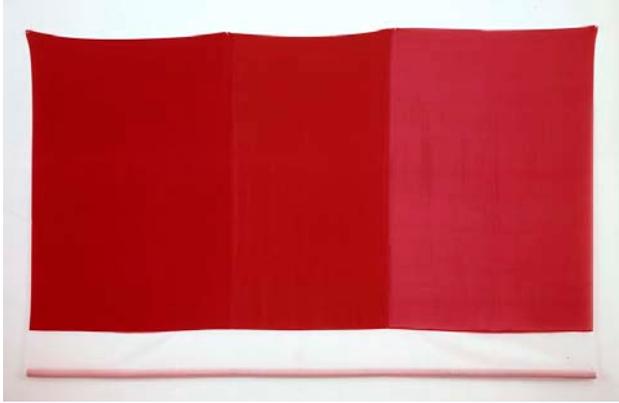
Q: Right. That's interesting to think about the larger collaboration that goes into this in some way.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, again, I think these [Untitled (*Jammer*), 1975 and *Pimiento III (Jammer)*, 1976] were probably just lengths of fabric that he would have got because I think the other place that we did go to was the shop which sold silk fabric. And again it was the color I think that caught his eye. And it probably was all to go into what he would then later use, without necessarily knowing what it was going to be. But it appealed to him and so he would have got it.

Q: Well he did talk about afterwards how this trip actually opened him up to color in some way and so maybe we're starting to get into similar territory here.

A. Sarabhai: I think so.

Q: We're looking at *Pimiento III*.



Robert Rauschenberg
Pimiento III (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric and fabric-covered rattan poles
78 x 126 inches (198.1 x 320 cm)
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, New York

A. Sarabhai: And some of them, not being able to see properly whether there is actually a stitching line as well, in some of them where they are very large widths of fabric, if they are very large widths, they may not have been woven here because usually width was the constraint on the looms.

Q: And what would be an outer width limit—

A. Sarabhai: No, if there's a joint that's a different thing. If there's a joint, you would be doing it for the length of it.

S. Sarabhai: It would be done here.

A. Sarabhai: But in the width normally it would be anywhere from 45 to 48 inches, very occasionally 50 inches. And in some of the silks, we did get 50 inches. But I don't think it would be any wider than that. So I think that would give a clue as well.

Q: It would be sourced from a different place then?

S. Sarabhai: Yes, if it's a much larger width. There were cases, but I can't remember that far back whether that would have—there have occasionally been silk in 60-inch widths, but I don't remember it being any bigger than that.

Q: That would have been very much the exception?

A. Sarabhai: Yes, exactly.

Q: Yes and then these all—

A. Sarabhai: That's a sari.

Q: So we're looking at *Gull* [(*Jammer*), 1976], the third [textile] panel on the right with the white and the blue. So the bordering really is what distinguishes it as a Bengali pattern?

A. Sarabhai: Yes. These again I think would be from here.

Q: First and second panels of *Gull*, right to left.



Robert Rauschenberg
Gull (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric, rattan poles, and twine
103 x 200 x 19 inches (261.6 x 508 x 48.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; and
gift of Virginia C. Field, Mr. and Mrs. Walter
Nelson Pharr, Anonymous, and Ruth Vollmer
(all by exchange)

A. Sarabhai: Because they look more like tussah. In fact, off the cuff, I would say most of it is from here. But I think it's worth actually measuring the widths because that would give—I'm sure they have the measurements of them.

Q: Yes, I'm sure.

A. Sarabhai: Wherever there are joints you can understand that it would—but this looks like the wild silks, tussah silk, and I know he bought that here as well. But in the absence of being able to actually touch it and feel it and look at it closely, from the photograph it's hard to say with certainty.

Q: Yes, I see those limitations. This is the detail of *Gull*, so here we have—

A. Sarabhai: I think this would be tussah and tussah was often very heavily calendared to make the weaving of it easier because it was a raw silk and in the spinning it would break quite easily. So they would sort of starch it.

Q: So we're looking at the detail of *Gull* here. So once you get close you can see the texture.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, I think, it looks to me as though it was probably a tussah. Though I stand to correction until seeing it. [Laughs]

Q: I think that pretty much runs us through, one way or another.

S. Sarabhai: These are definitely all got here [referring to several *Jammers* as we scroll through].

A. Sarabhai: That was definitely here.

S. Sarabhai: All these that went behind these, all those silks were got here. They were made here.

A. Sarabhai: I see the *Hibiscus* [*(Jammer)*, 1976]. I think he had it in Florida too, but it was very prevalent here too; it was the season when a lot of hibiscus is in flower. So it's interesting that—
[laughs]

Q: That he titled it this.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, yes. And there was a range of colors.

S. Sarabhai: What is the title?

Q: *Hibiscus*.

A. Sarabhai: I would be inclined to think that because this was so close on the heels of the work he did here, I think he could have well used the resources that he collected here, in terms of the fabric and stuff. Again this could well be from here because the Khadi—

Q: *Snowpool* [(*Jammer*), 1976].

A. Sarabhai: —they still do, but they used to do quite a lot of striped fabric for shirts and stuff. And the widths here certainly look as though that could tally.

Q: So that's interesting, he was sourcing it here, but that some of it might be distinctive in say an Ahmedabad or Gujarati style and then that some of it would have been interpretation of other—

A. Sarabhai: Yes, absolutely.

S. Sarabhai: But sourced locally and taken back, whatever pieces were finished.

A. Sarabhai: But again, it's hard to know what his treasure troves of cupboards held in terms of what he had because he had access to all sorts of material. Material was very much part of his sensibility as well.

Q: That's excellent. Yes, that gives us some helpful detail. I'm just trying to fill in some of the material of his work and since you all— Oh, here's one more thing actually from *Unions*, isn't it? And so this would have been—looking at *Charter* [*(Unions)*, 1975] here—this would have been of the mud.



Robert Rauschenberg
Charter (Unions), 1975
Rag-mud, rope, and bamboo
81 x 29 1/2 x 24 inches (205.7 x 74.9 x 61 cm),
dimensions variable
From an edition of 15, published by Gemini G.E.L.,
Los Angeles

A. Sarabhai: Yes, or the rag-mud. [laughs]

Q: Or the rag-mud, right. [Laughs] No, this is good though. I think it clarifies some of those questions or at least clarifies the questions we have now. So unless there's anything else that comes to mind about *Bones* and—we covered it really quite well in those sessions that we did in New York.

A. Sarabhai: That was forty years ago, just over forty years ago, when they were made.

Q: Yes, that would be just over forty-one.

A. Sarabhai: Suhrid probably showed you that outside space where they were actually made.

Q: Yes, I'd like to go take some photographs of that just to bring back to the Foundation. So if anything else comes to mind about that, of course I'd love to hear it. One thing is that, fast-forwarding, you mentioned that when you saw him in Venice years later, he was working, you think, on a piece for the Cipriani.

S. Sarabhai: Yes.

A. Sarabhai: That wasn't why he was there. I can't remember whether there was a Biennale or what.

S. Sarabhai: I don't know why he was there.

A. Sarabhai: I think the Cipriani thing was probably a kind of exchange thing—I get good rooms and—which is great. It was lovely.

Q: And so the Foundation was curious if you remembered any sort of detail about this. They're trying to track this down and I recommended, we were considering contacting the Cipriani. The Foundation doesn't have any record of it because he so rarely worked outside of his studios by that point and just whether—

S. Sarabhai: They don't have that painting? They must have—Cipriani must have. We only remember taking the children to have a bath in the Jacuzzi.

[Laughter]

S. Sarabhai: Because he had a Jacuzzi and we were—

A. Sarabhai: And he said, “Come. The children will love it.”

S. Sarabhai: “Come and spend the whole day.” —In many ways, this business of analyzing threadbare what happened or where did the fabric come from, it sort of—in my view—goes against what he stood for. Really it does, regardless of whether he's there or not. It sort of misses the point, I think, of whether it's a Bengali sari or a Gujarati sari or a Khadi piece.

A. Sarabhai: I think this effort is different. This is simply an effort to try and document, just like you're [Suhrid] trying to document stuff [in his organization of family and art records].

S. Sarabhai: No, no, I'm just trying to document from a historical point of view, not from a technical point of view.

A. Sarabhai: But because Bob had such a huge—

S. Sarabhai: This technical analysis of what he did—

A. Sarabhai: But I think that is part of how art history is recorded.

S. Sarabhai: But that is such a shame, actually, according to me too.

Q: I'm curious about your thoughts about that actually. My own interest is certainly primarily in the stories about—

S. Sarabhai: In the story—the story is very interesting. No, I'm not trying to undermine; I think the story is fascinating. I think what came out of that story is also wonderful. [Laughs]

Q: So could you flesh out that, the contradiction that you sense there? Could you flesh that out a little?

S. Sarabhai: No, it's not a contradiction. It goes against the spirit of the man, I think, the joyfulness, the fun, the—

A. Sarabhai: I think also what is true is that it wasn't so much in the nitpicky detail that he was interested in, but it was really the voraciousness of his appetite.

S. Sarabhai: Exactly.

A. Sarabhai: That he saw and somehow took in and digested and re-gave something in a different form. But it could have come from anywhere. It just happened that if he was here then he would have probably seen much more than we see, because we're here, you just sort of don't see it very often or don't hear it very often. Whereas I think his sort of alertness and curiosity and his roving eye—

S. Sarabhai: And generosity—he was an incredibly generous person.

A. Sarabhai: He would have taken things in; he would have taken in a lot.

S. Sarabhai: To say that, "I'm painting, but let the children come and use the Jacuzzi and spend the day," or when we landed in Captiva, to come and fetch us at the airport. We thought he would send someone. And before we got back, because he knew we were all vegetarian, "Let's go to this huge American supermarket with the trolley, pushing—"

A. Sarabhai: Because he thought the children would enjoy doing that. I think it was really the fun element for the children. Because there were no supermarkets here at that point, thankfully.

[Laughter]

S. Sarabhai: No, that fun element.

A. Sarabhai: It was the fun element of them racing.

S. Sarabhai: There was a supermarket—it was huge.

A. Sarabhai: I'm saying because they weren't here often in the United States, he thought that it would be good fun for them, which it was.

S. Sarabhai: He was the kind of person to say that if anyone complained about the heat in Ahmedabad he would be put on the next flight back. Of course Gemini was there, my brother was there, but Bob's way of working and involving everyone—somehow when you start analyzing where did the thread come from, I think it takes the essence out of it, if you see what I mean, of the overview— That is what it's all about, how an experience—even though he was not, as you are, coming for the first time to Ahmedabad. He had been here before; he knew the family. I think some of the other people had known India even more than Bob. And swimming in the swimming pool and watching the sky is what it's all about, in my view, and getting up late in the morning and having lunch here, exactly where we are. But how many people were there, it was like a party every day. He had such difficulty with customs to bring in the crates of Jack Daniel's that he brought. No, really at that time you wouldn't just—and now we have [alcohol] prohibition. [Laughs]

Q: I know now that's the case. In Gujarat at the time, alcohol still would not have been—?

S. Sarabhai: No, we have always had prohibition.

A. Sarabhai: It's a bit more lax now, but at that point it was very strong.

Q: That's astonishing that he got it through customs.

S. Sarabhai: No, they paid duty through Bombay. There was no international airport in Ahmedabad then. Bombay customs, pay the duty on those crates, come here. It's quarter to one now; this is even early to start. It would start at about 1:30, two o'clock, 2:30 and go on to midnight, one o'clock. It was great. [Laughs]

Q: And I think that's the spark. And being here, so to me it totally transforms my own way of thinking about the relationship. I think you [Asha] mentioned in one of our previous sessions that for you, the person precedes the artist in some way.

A. Sarabhai: Yes.

S. Sarabhai: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: And that's what you're [Suhrid] getting at as well, seeing it in these—

S. Sarabhai: But it depends—there's no need for anything to either precede or not precede. It was just like—

A. Sarabhai: No, it was who he was and that was what he did. That's what gave him his sense of being alive and sort of transforming something into something else, without any great pretensions involved in it. But what came through constantly was his alertness and his ability to really see things in ways that not necessarily many people do see them, and to see them as something else and as themselves as well. So there were always different things going on; they were always multi-stranded, in a way.

Q: Another thing that you've [Asha] mentioned in previous sessions is this idea that—I wrote this down here, “functionality doesn't only reside in something you can use, but also in what gives you pleasure.” And so for me, in the tour you just gave me around the house and the grounds, Suhrid, it's extraordinary—you're just walking through and the openness between the house and the land around it is extraordinary. [Note: The Corbusier house has many sliding walls that can open out to the garden, leading to a sense that in walking through the house, the home and the garden are interwoven and lead fluidly into one another.] You're in the house and there's not that—

A. Sarabhai: Division between inside and outside.

Q: There's not that hard divide.

A. Sarabhai: No, that's true.

Q: So what an interesting place for him to work in that regard, where indoors, outdoors—

A. Sarabhai: All were one.

Q: —a lot of these boundaries of the Corbusier house and then you turn a corner and all of a sudden you have one of his pieces or one of his posters there. It gives them a whole other context and life—

A. Sarabhai: When was Bob's actual move to Captiva, for instance?

Q: That would have been around 1970.

A. Sarabhai: Yes, so it was earlier.

S. Sarabhai: Slightly earlier. But Captiva also, I think that he didn't acquire the whole thing at one time. He went on, and also those things that were built, those cottages also—

A. Sarabhai: Absolutely, absolutely. But it's just the surround of vegetation which I think he was very in tune with there; he probably felt there must have been resonances with the sense of being sort of in a jungle, certainly in the outside bit.

S. Sarabhai: But it started off with saying that, "I don't want to go to Japan." [Laughs] I don't think all these things, in hindsight one can say oh this, this, the similarity—he just didn't want to go to Japan. [Laughs] "And I'm sorry to wake you up at two o'clock in the morning or three

o'clock in the morning—" And if I can get a hold of my brother—whether he mentioned it in his diary— But he did tell me the day after, he said Bob had called him and he was going to then go to the mill and find out—because we really, for this project, needed a line. It was not good enough to get paper to the studio; we actually needed to interrupt the production process. And they only had two—

A. Sarabhai: At that point they were more open to it than they would be today.

S. Sarabhai: Yes, but even now they would be open because people from making Khadi have moved to mill cloth. Similarly, people from this rag paper have moved to other things.

A. Sarabhai: To other paper.

S. Sarabhai: So it's how something happens through accident or desire and then because there are nice people involved, it's nice. [Laughs] I think for some of the other people it was new. In fact, for all of them it was new, except Bob. I think Bob Petersen came for the first time and Sachika and Sidney and also Gianfranco. So he was the person who was introducing India to his group, his team.

Q: No, I think that's true. So this more or less takes me through the questions that we have.

S. Sarabhai: These are all our addresses, telephone numbers.

Q: Oh perfect, thank you. That's great. Yes, I can keep in touch with all these things.

S. Sarabhai: Yes.

Q: Thank you so much for all these. So yes, I have your poem here, Asha.

[Laughter]

A. Sarabhai: Oh no.

Q: It's really lovely. And there's something that you said here and I think this is what both of you were getting at, that there's this, so you say, "Proliferation/That abounds/Beyond our ken." There's something happening here that's beyond the material or beyond the work in some way.

A. Sarabhai: Yes.

S. Sarabhai: Absolutely.

Q: "Undaunted/To give space/And be endowed." And so I guess just as a closing question for this session, we're in this space that gave rise to this art. I'm curious if you just have any—with that line, "Proliferation that abounds beyond our ken, undaunted, to give space and be endowed." Since we're in the space where these things were endowed with their creation, the space that made them, I'm wondering if you just have any final comments on them. And this could be the

pieces that you have here, the way in which they fit in the house, just any final reflections on this space in particular, since we have the luxury and the opportunity to be here together and come full circle on these pieces.

A. Sarabhai: I think, if one locates it in this space, it is that this space is a very giving space. And I think the kinds of spaces that Bob created both around himself physically—in terms of homes he lived in and then in terms of the work he made—were always open-ended. As you said earlier, there are no divides between outside and inside, and I think the kind of permeability between people as well was something which covered the whole range of—I've mentioned this before, that I do think that he was never somebody—it wasn't either about good behavior or bad behavior; you behaved as you were. And yet you were very generous and courteous as well. So there were several things that went on, but you were always open to yourself. And I think it begins with yourself, that open-endedness.

S. Sarabhai: But also respectful to others, whether you're—

A. Sarabhai: Sure, absolutely.

S. Sarabhai: —whether it was Samir, who was a year or two years old—our young son was two years old and coming into the studio. And also just trying to involve people into whatever you're doing, not—

A. Sarabhai: But I think the respect was about being open to the range of who each person can be, so that it wasn't to form per se, but it was to possibility. And that possibility included the capacity to feel strongly and not to just acquiesce for the sake of things. The issues weren't about control, so that the space, whether it's a physical space, as long as it opens out rather than seeks to contain and control, I think gives a very different feel to how you are in a space.

But I think that's something that probably is also very much part of the human spirit. You both need certain elements of containment all the time, but you also need the elements that actually permit you to go beyond. And I think that's what he did and I think that's what he did all the time. It wasn't a conscious thing, but it was just the way he was as a person, so that he never, to my mind anyway, got stuck in a way of repeating form.

S. Sarabhai: Repeating?

Q: Form.

A. Sarabhai: That it was sort of constantly evolving. And I think that whole evolutionary thing, in the best sense, was something that he was never daunted by. Things happen and they move and they excite you or then you are not excited by them. He didn't have any problem, within its best sense, the notion of promiscuity. It was a kind of capacity to be in the moment really. The thing that everyone talks about seeking through Buddhism or through great endeavor and through sitting down and meditating, I think he was just that because he was totally absorbed when he was in something. And the focus was completely—I think that thing that meditation is

supposed to give to people is the capacity to become reabsorbed, to remember what it is as a child. When I see the children or when you read, you read and if anyone disturbs you, you don't hear them. You're just there. And that really is surely what meditation is about. This whole thing about trying to achieve being in the moment is so farfetched because the minute you set about trying to do it, you've lost it in a way. And I think he embodied—most of the time. I'm sure there were all sorts of moments in his life, but I think he embodied that capacity in a very vital kind of way, certainly as far as I felt it or responded to it. But I'm sure that's true for a lot of people, I would imagine.

S. Sarabhai: No, it's not true for a lot of people. [Laughs] That's true for a very few people.

A. Sarabhai: I'm sure that's true for what people— No, I'm sure that that's what people felt when I say I can only talk personally of the impact or the affect it had on me.

S. Sarabhai: Living in the moment, it is very rare actually, in my view.

Q: And that's probably something that his art—

S. Sarabhai: I think so.

Q: —has given you all, clearly, and still in the seeing can give others.

Well perfect, that runs me down some of the things I have.

S. Sarabhai: Time for a Gujarati lunch.

[Laughter]

Q: Exactly. That's perfect. Thank you both for agreeing to be on these lapel microphones one more time.

[Laughter]

A. Sarabhai: Luckily one forgets about that actually and I think that's perhaps your gift as well. No, it's true, because I think one forgets that it's about taping and with you actually it's a conversation.

S. Sarabhai: And of course whatever there is in New York that might enrich our archive, do please—

A. Sarabhai: Who's talking about archives, Suhrid? I thought you just said you weren't interested in—sorry, I'm being wicked. [Laughs]

S. Sarabhai: No, no, if I were interested in archiving then I would have answers to many of your questions. But I do think—

A. Sarabhai: I'm just teasing.

S. Sarabhai: —that if there had been an experience here and something happened, we should share whatever—

Q: I agree.

S. Sarabhai: And I'll try and see the film whenever I can see the film and then analyze.

A. Sarabhai: The films would be quite refreshing actually, because often they give a very different view from somatic—

S. Sarabhai: I would be very surprised if it's not, because it was my job—again in the mornings he was never there—but in the evenings to do the photography. My brother was so—and so many people to look after and meals and this and that. So I'm sure there is film. I'll try and find it out for you, and if there is, I'll send it to you or to the Foundation. In fact, I'll tell you before you go whether it is there or not, and if it is there, we can see it.

Q: Excellent.

S. Sarabhai: We can see it together.

Q: Yes and I'll bring that back to the Foundation and they'll listen to this audio. It's nice to think it led to these two projects—or a third with *Jammers*—but that the dialogue, it's extraordinary.

A. Sarabhai: That it continues.

Q: I'm here because he was here forty-one years ago. So it's interesting how the resonance— So thank you both.

A. Sarabhai: No, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session: Dantani postscript

Interviewees: Manu Dantani with Asha and
Suhrid Sarabhai translating

Location: Ahmedabad, India

Interviewer: Cameron Vanderscoff

Date: November 22, 2016

[Note: The following conversation occurred organically and the recorder was turned on in the middle of a discussion about Robert Rauschenberg's 1975 visit to India, focused on what materials and process went into the *Bones* and *Unions* series he worked on there.]

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] To prevent insects, there was a chemical.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] So there was actually no earth in it.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: He's saying it was just very compressed, the pulp.

Q: So there's no mud involved?

A. Sarabhai: No, it was just the fenugreek seeds, which were powdered. It was the tamarind seeds, which were powdered. It was some chemical to prevent insects coming into it.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] So it was probably the color that gave it the earth appearance.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] It was the color that came from the fenugreek seeds.

Q: So the brown is not then the mud, it's actually—

A. Sarabhai: Exactly. The seeds and the tamarind seeds are very brown as well.

S. Sarabhai: This is the other one [showing pictures of working with the “mud” in 1975].

Q: Ah yes, right. And so it's a rag base though.

A. Sarabhai: And very compressed.

Q: And so is this then, there's photos of you molding.

A. Sarabhai: Making them [*Unions*].

Q: So that would be—?

A. Sarabhai: Some, all the different—because there’s also one piece, which is a ball— [Note: *Quorum (Unions)*, 1975]

S. Sarabhai: You saw the close-up of the hand? [Referencing a photo where “mud” balls are being molded by hand]

A. Sarabhai: And with rope in it?



Robert Rauschenberg
Quorum (Unions), 1975
Rag-mud, rope, bamboo, and mud
64 x 45 x 4 1/2 inches (162.6 x 114.3 x 11.4 cm),
dimensions variable
From an edition of 13, published by Gemini G.E.L.,
Los Angeles

[A. Sarabhai, S. Sarabhai, and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

Q: So then one material would just be the rag paper and then we're thinking the other one is this rag base that's dyed by—

A. Sarabhai: The seeds. I think the fenugreek and the tamarind together probably had an effect because tamarind's quite a dark seed too. And fenugreek—the color of fenugreek is more like this.

S. Sarabhai: I think alum, fenugreek, methi and these chemicals were really done—I think they even checked with the U.S. Customs because they didn't want these to be taken there and then destroyed in customs.

A. Sarabhai: That's why they were fumigated, yes.

S. Sarabhai: So I think all that was gone into before this thing was made.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] The bamboos were all from the garden.

Q: Then I'm curious about any memories of Bob that Manu has?

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

S. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] We had an exhibition in the house and all the people from here, from the Gandhi Ashram, et cetera, came there.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: He says he remembers working together, but he's also remembering [Frank] Stella working with the metal sheets and stuff. But I think he remembers working together here and making the pieces.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: He remembers the dyeing of the shirts and things were done here because at that time these weren't offices. [Note: This interview occurred in S. Sarabhai's office.]

Q: This was a workspace at the time, where we are currently?

A. Sarabhai: Yes, it was a space that was used to actually set up the whole dyeing step. And the making of the—

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] There were another two carpenters as well.

[A. Sarabhai, S. Sarabhai, and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: He remembers also going to the ashram and working on *Little Joe*. He remembers *Little Joe* and the process of how it was made into a kind of sandwich thing by putting the paper pulp first and then the other.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: According to Manu, the ropes and stuff that we used in some of the pieces would just be brought here so Bob could select which he wanted. He didn't actually go out and find them.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] And the fabric was bought at these secondhand places as well, other than the Khadi shops, the bits—the little bit in *Little Joe* was a piece from one of these secondhand piles.

Q: So I just passed what Mohammed [Ghulam Nabi Malik], the driver from yesterday, was saying was a secondhand market. It was this huge field of fabric and people running around and just like a—

A. Sarabhai: That's right. And sometimes you find people with just bundles, piles of cloth.

Q: Yes, that's exactly what it looks like, sitting all out on the side of the street, with people weaving through this whole—

A. Sarabhai: Absolutely. And people, I think they often sell it by weight, so you'll just buy everything. And what is wonderful is how you see people then transforming it into the clothes they wear. They make some fantastic things from it. It's really wonderful. It's really exactly what, in the sense what we were saying, "Jean-Paul Gaultier eat your heart out, because you'll never get anything like this." But there is, there's a resourcefulness that goes with what Gira was saying, which again I think we forget in today's situation where artists are so well-endowed in many ways. At that point, people who made a lot with very little, the issue wasn't the money you had to do it; it was your resourcefulness as much as anything, as well as your ideas. I think they worked together, I would imagine.

Q: It's true. So in terms of this local sourcing then, so the secondhand, is this something that Manu would be going to the secondhand market and bringing things back, or this would be like an activity with Bob?

A. Sarabhai: No, at that time we made quite a few forays together. So Bob did go because I think he liked looking and he liked picking what struck him. But the ropes, Manu says—I was just trying to ask about the ropes—and he was saying he remembers also that for the cloth, it was a personal going and selecting. But the ropes were brought.

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: [translating for Dantani] He remembers when, at our wedding reception, Pal Babu, who was an art teacher at Shreyas, at the school. He used to come in occasionally to help or to give advice on something, but what Manu says is that he wasn't that involved in the rag project [*Bones and Unions*]. He says he came a couple of times. But he actually helped make this enormous kind of dragon thing that was filled with fireworks at the wedding and then some of them just went off.

[Laughter]

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

A. Sarabhai: It is true, it was a long time ago. But he has a memory of it, which is nice. He must have—

[A. Sarabhai and Dantani discuss in Gujarati]

S. Sarabhai: Okay, I must go. So everything is set up for you to spend—

Q: Thank you, sir.

[END OF INTERVIEW]