

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Mayo Thompson

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of two recorded interviews with Mayo Thompson conducted by Sara Sinclair on March 19 and March 20, 2015. 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: Mayo Thompson

Location: Los Angeles, California

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: March 19, 2015

Q: Let me just say that it's a pleasure to meet you.

Thompson: Thank you. And my pleasure to meet you.

Q: It is March 19, 2015. I'm in Los Angeles. Will you please introduce yourself?

Thompson: I'm Mayo Thompson.

Q: And I'm Sara Sinclair. I would really like to just start with you. If we could start with a little bit about where and when you were born and some of your earliest memories.

Thompson: I was born on February 26, 1944, in Houston, Texas. St. Joseph Hospital [St. Joseph Medical Center]. I do not remember—probably somewhere I remember parts, aspects. I had color from the first moment, no doubt. My mother and father were twenty—well let's see, she was born in 1921, so she was twenty-three or so. My father was twenty-six and he was in the armed services, the war was going on. He was a graduate of Texas A&M University [College Station], class of '41, graduated second lieutenant and was obliged, was eager to serve, according to the lore, and I have no reason to doubt that. My mother was a graduate of the University of

Houston and had been to convent school and all kinds of things during her girlhood. Her parents were electrical contractors. Her father's parents had come from Alsace-Lorraine and Ireland, and refrigeration figured somehow in the family business and so on—the first icehouse in Houston. According to these things I don't really know very much, I'm afraid I'm very, very poor on it.

My mother and father separated soon after I was born and we lost contact with the family because my mother was alone by the time she was twenty-one so I didn't know my grandparents nor my aunt, my mother's sister. They were all deceased. So we were alone. When I came to a consciousness, when I began to realize what was going on, I realized that my mother and I were on our own and that my father was at some distance. Which was not troubling to me for some reason at the time. My mother began teaching school as a way of sustaining us. She taught first in junior high school and then in high school. She taught at San Jacinto High School [Houston] for years. There was many a famous alumnus from that school—Walter [Leland] Cronkite [Jr.] for example. She taught some very interesting people. She taught fine art and English and was in charge of the booster club. So I grew up around a lot of other kids who were all a little bit older than I was. I was always looking up at the world happening very fast and anxious to get into it.

My mother had bohemian friends as well as all manner of friends, all classes, shapes, and sizes, from cowboys and cowgirls to intellectuals and jazz piano players and the whole gang. So I was exposed to an awful lot of interesting stuff as a kid. Things were left lying around for me to discover for myself: magazines, books, papers, and all sorts of things. I think my mother

understood me very well—she thought, hmm, he'll find it himself. And I did find something. I'm sure she despaired on other fronts.

I got into kindergarten somehow; I suppose that was a moment I remember. I can remember various things about my childhood, around the house. But we were a little bit different because I was raised in great part by a black lady, in the first instance a woman named Stella Marchand and later a woman named Merdis Henson, and also the daughter of some people, of a black woman who had raised my mother, Mary Crooks's daughter, named Gladys Clow. She had a brother named Mama's Baby and her daddy's name was Voltaire. They were a fine family. Houston was apartheid in my childhood. Jim Crow. That had a nontrivial effect upon my worldview. To boil it down, racism spoiled my childhood in a great aspect. My mother was egalitarian and liberal-minded without being politically committed to any sort of organized liberalism as such, a humanist position more than anything. An enlightened lady and she read a lot, had lots of magazines around. So I was exposed to everything that was there.

On my father's side, he was a military man and after the war years he became a lawyer, quite a good one, a litigator, and a formidable fellow. He, on the other hand, was a committed conservative and at a certain age was born again. So there was this tension in the family on those two sides, although my mother never said a word against him. I developed a habit over the years, thanks to her, of keeping in touch with him and it worked out finally. In the long run we were able to make some kind of peace, which was very nice. But his influence on me was from a distance.

I went to kindergarten. The famous moment, I suppose, was the end of school thing where I was meant to do something at the school performance and I came on stage and I said, “I was told I was supposed to do so-and-so. I won’t do that. Instead I will do such-and-such,” and I did something else. I was allowed to do this. My mother had given me the confidence to take that relationship to those kinds of activities. That’s where it started and then you can see where it’s landed me. In show business. I was bitten early by the fame and glamour bug absolutely.

Houston was a sleepy city, but extremely rich, and there were some highly cultivated people there who knew what was what and who was who and who had power and where they were and I numbered among them. [Dog barks] This may break out again because my neighbor has dogs. My neighbor is very interesting as well; she’s Mary Woronov, she was in *Chelsea Girls*. She knew Bob.

Q: Really?

Thompson: Sure. I’m sure she would’ve met him. Is this going on too long?

Q: No, not at all.

Thompson: So anyway, I went to elementary school and did fine until the fifth grade and then—this was ’55—Houston seemed a little dangerous and I kind of wanted to get out of there.

Q: Dangerous?

Thompson: Yeah. Juvenile delinquency. *Blackboard Jungle* [directed by Richard Brooks] came out in 1955. Rock-and-roll appeared in 1955, you could hear it out of the pig stand door, the juke joint on the corner, that kind of thing. It was a little formidable because I was living alone with my mother and—I can remember standing in our kitchen one day and there was a shadow of somebody creeping up the back stairs. Yeah, it was risky because my mother was an attractive woman and—women, god almighty, when I think about what women have to go through in general and to realize looking back on it—that must have been miserable for her. Ninety-nine percent of the time it was activity on all fronts and trying to carry on, to raise me, keep a job, blah-blah-blah. It was expensive in those days and a Texas woman could barely own property. Could be in your name, maybe administered on somebody else's behalf as well, and all that kind of stuff. Our banker went to jail, Mr. Willard [phonetic].

My mother had friends like Frank Culver [phonetic], Two Gun they called him. The guy fancied himself after Sam Bass, an old Texas gangster. My mother had a complex life. So at a certain moment my great aunt, my grandmother's sister, asked me if I wanted to go to military school because it had become known in the neighborhood that there was a military school. My cousin had been over there to summer camp. I said right away, "Yeah." I also wanted out of the house. I was eleven years old and I'd seen pretty much what was going on there and I was anxious to do something else anyway. So I went to military school for three years and did fine there. When I

came out of there I went to high school in Oklahoma, to a prep school. I was in prep school, boarding school, for seven years. When I came home I was eighteen; when I left I was eleven. I started school at the University of St. Thomas in Houston and lived in my mother's house.

I tried pre-law at first and failed, it never took. But I fell in with some older upper-class kids and got involved in the creative writing program and the English department, studied that for a while. Then I got to see the art department; they had a gallery there. My mother had taken me to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston as a child. I had gashed my head on a gas jet there as a kid, going around a post. This was back when they had a basement; you would go downstairs and there would be all the art and so on. So I was exposed to all that stuff a lot. I went to the gallery there and Louise Ferrari was sitting there and Dr. [Jermayne Virginia] MacAgy ran the joint. I said, "So this gallery," I thought it's the university and I said, "Do students show here?" And she went, "Oh no, no, no." She explained to me that the de Menils [John and Dominique] were behind the gallery in some sense and Dr. MacAgy and so on, and it was tied to the art history department, and it actually belonged to the real art world. That was the first I ever heard that there was such a thing. When I say real art world I'm talking about the extended connection of institutions and all of those things. When I came to find out who these people were James Johnson Sweeney was at the Museum of Fine Arts and it was quite a place. Donald Barthelme ran the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston for a while. So the art history department finally got my attention and I started there, I don't know when. I guess in '64, something like that.

In '65 I went to Europe and sat in Paris, and [Frederick W.] Fred Hughes and I ran around together. He was working at Iolas Gallery [Paris]. By that time I had seen Rauschenberg's work and I saw the show in Houston with the Combine paintings at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, which just riveted me [note: *Robert Rauschenberg, 1965*]. I had never seen art that moved me in any way. I'd seen art you're supposed to be interested in. And I thought, this is different. This is like—it speaks to you in some sense. It's an asymmetrical relation, of course, because the thing is the thing. But it touched me in some way that no artwork ever had before.

Q: Can you talk about that a little bit more? What do you remember about seeing that work for the first time?

Thompson: I've always been a skeptic of the value of things because there's been so much shoved at me as—this is the greatest thing you ever saw in your life, this is the most beautiful and historic and dah-dah-dah. All these things, they don't go together and yet they're presented to me out of holistic positions, philosophically holistic positions. So I'm trying to reconcile a bunch of worldviews that sustain these kinds of values and I can't do that; I'm too young to understand, to compartmentalize—I just don't have the category chops. I haven't been exposed to enough stuff to know what the hell they're talking about most of the time. But I'm trying. And I'm being exposed to all of this stuff. So I've been to a lot of museums already and I know what's going on in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, but now suddenly here's another dimension. This is the Contemporary Arts Museum and I go there with my friend [Frederick]

Barthelme, who's Donald's younger brother, and Frederick and I have gotten to be friends since '63, shortly after the [President John F.] Kennedy assassination.

What impressed me about it was that unlike what was in the Museum of Fine Arts, which was connected to New York in a different way, because it belonged to some sort of established view of things—contemporary, that's the first time I'd ever heard it, I thought— It occurred to me that everything is contemporary, isn't it? The classics are also at this end. It's when you think of it, I had come to realize—but I began to really appreciate these distinctions. There's a museum and there's a museum-like institution, which appreciates trendy sorts of things, and it happens in a place where they also have jazz concerts and dah-dah-dah-dah— Mixed culture, you begin to appreciate without really understanding how it works in infrastructural terms—about how people are making a living and so on; you just begin to understand it, like everybody's interested in this and this all happens this way and some of it's more interesting than others. The way they did it was interesting.

So that went away and all this happened, the Beatles came along while I went to Europe. I came back and *Barge* [1962–63] came, this very large piece by Bob on paper [note: oil and silkscreen ink on canvas]—



Robert Rauschenberg

*Barge*, 1962–63

Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas

79 7/8 x 386 inches (202.9 x 980.4 cm)

Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and with additional funds contributed by Thomas H. Lee and Ann Tenenbaum; the International Director's Council and Executive Committee Members: Eli Broad, Elaine Teer Cooper, Ronnie Heyman, J. Tomlinson Hill, Dakis Joannou, Barbara Lane, Robert Mnuchin, Peter Norton, Thomas Walther, and Ginny Williams; and funds from additional donors: Ulla Dreyfus-Best, Norma and Joseph Saul Philanthropic Fund; Elizabeth Rea; Eli Broad; Dakis Joannou; Peter Norton; Peter Lawson-Johnston; Michael Wettach; Peter Littmann; Tiqui Atencio; Bruce and Janet Karatz; and Giulia Ghirardi Pagliai, 1997

This was where it got to be very interesting because I was really moved by the Combine works and I remember one of them vividly, *Magician* [1959], you go, what's in that little bag? And it's bottle caps. I now know Bob, I begin to think in the train of thought of Bob, and those bottle caps, those are rich, they go all the way to cowrie shells and very primitive things, pieces of exchange and all that stuff, and the way that they're hanging off this scaffold and the little bags so that you can just quite see it was a juju bag. Bob's a kind of shaman it turns out and he really conjures stuff out of things you've looked at and would overlook normally rather than out of the finest things that there are, the best toile, et cetera. He's got a taste for junk.



Robert Rauschenberg

*Magician*, 1959

Combine: oil, fabric, wood, printed paper, printed reproductions, and metal on canvas with fabric pouch and string

65 3/8 x 38 1/8 x 16 1/8 inches (166.1 x 96.8 x 41 cm)

Private collection

I appreciate this because in Houston the de Menils also sustained an awful large set of relations, a community of relations, including a fellow named Jim Love, who was a sculptor, who made very, very delightfully funny pieces out of bits and pieces of plumbing, which he would stick together in funny, funny, funny sorts of ways. Which owed something, of course, to [Fernand] Léger and the whole tradition of this kind of stuff, but had its own humor and had its own validity to it, quality to it. At the same time there was this poignant moment because you realize this guy ain't going to New York. This ain't going any further than right here.

Q: Why?

Thompson: Local art.

Q: And you could see that.

Thompson: Yeah. Partly because the guy never bothered to leave. It's kind of like—I started leaving. I was always leaving. As soon as I could move out of there, I was always trying to leave. Not because I disliked the place, but just because I had things I wanted to do. I didn't know what, but I knew I wanted to do something. So Jim Love and [Richard] Dick Wray and [James] Jack Boynton and painters like these two, and I'd slight some people by not being able to mention all of their names. Local guys who really walked it like they talked it, what you would call old-school sorts of people—people who knew what was going on in painting. There was also the local contribution of David Adickes, who was very popular. His work was somewhere between LeRoy Neiman and Bernard Buffet. It was popular over mantelpieces in the stately homes and so on all around here, so they were hugely successful. So one saw that there was a whole range of possible options and you could see where they came from. I don't particularly care for David Adickes's pictorial content, but his color field from David Hockney, he knew what he was doing. He knew what his public was and he'd made a decision that that was what he was interested in. With Rauschenberg, I just felt something general was going on, something propositional, something theoretical with respect to the very idea of this junk and—I mean junk, this junk, to be seen as this kind of thing, as a work of art. Which requires some sort of transformation.

Q: Were the Combines the first pieces that you saw that—?

Thompson: The very first things. I had never seen anything before, never heard the guy's name before.

Q: Okay, I was going to ask, because you were studying. I was wondering if his name had already come up in your studies at all.

Thompson: No. That's not true actually. I had maybe heard his name and I went there with a purpose. When I started working in the art history department, I started working with Dr. William [A.] Camfield. The de Menils were very smart. They went and hired some talent. They went head-hunting and brought some people from Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut] down there and the guy who taught primitive art, which Fred Hughes and I slept through practically every session; the guy who taught Greek art and Greco-Roman art, like man on horse with one hoof in the air, two hooves, the whole deal. It was really quite amazing. Camfield was really good.

With Camfield, I was swatted up on Dadaism very well and Surrealism, which he understood. He knew the historical details, who had done what, with whom, where, when. Whatever you want to say about it at some sort of theoretical level or some intentional level, operational level, in terms of the greater culture and what people can think about these things; that's an open question. He made this possible. The way that he talked about art, he presented it in a rather straightforward sort of way. There was a tension between Romanticism and Classicism and it was possible to explain. I'm prepared for those reductions. I don't like narcissism versus Oedipalism for example. That's a little too tight for me and a little bit too functionalist in some sort of predictive sense. I never thought that Bob was predicting anything. It was like, "What do you think?"

Q: Okay. Did you feel like the classes or the study that you were just describing, impacted the way that you saw the work the first time?

Thompson: I felt that they all belonged together. There was no question that this was the same world, repeating itself in new terms. These are the same classic ideas that have sustained the very idea of art as a technical expertise and with respect to some kind of, what would you call it, mode of presentation. Bob had presentation in general at his grasp and he could understand modalities and he could figure out how to use this one and that one and that one and make this one do what this one does and flip the script and dah-dah-dah. And he was historically steeped. You see that from his friendships—Cy [Twombly]. Cy loved books, he loved the classical figures, loved the classics and so on. I only know [John] Cage and [Merce] Cunningham from a distance. I know Cage more, obviously, on a direct theoretical basis and Cunningham on a performative basis. The more interesting and the more complex and mysterious figure to me is [Jasper] Johns, and I look at Johns's painting next to Bob's painting.

I did know about Bob before Barthelme and I talked about him. It was Barthelme who introduced me, I'm beginning to remember now. Because Barthelme had moved out of his house and he had an apartment, and he and Joel [H.] McGlasson [II] were in there painting. He wasn't painting, he was making stuff that referred to painting, like hanging a bunch of junk on a stretcher. And they were talking about Bob and Jasper—those two particularly. And then we got to know about [Andy] Warhol of course.

Q: Before we move on, you said that you thought that Bob's work incorporated a lot of classical ideas so I was wondering—

Thompson: No, I didn't say that. I say it swims in—it belongs to the same world.

Q: Belongs to the same world.

Thompson: It belongs to the world in which those ideas are counted as ideas. That's what I would say. Because I don't think that Bob had studied the classics. I don't know what Bob's study of the classics was. He went to Black Mountain College [North Carolina] and he worked with Josef Albers. The story that comes out of there, we all know. Albers kept asking, "Why is this guy in my class?" And Bob was in his class because he wanted Albers to ask those questions probably. The stories about how Bob stalked Willem de Kooning.

Q: I was going to ask, recognizing that he belonged to the same world, what were some of the classical ideas that you saw when you—

Thompson: *Pail for Ganymede* [1959]. He flung it in your face, in references. It was hard to escape. One was thrown back onto the classic Ganymede, who the hell—why is he pale? He's not pale, it's a pail. Oh, a bucket. That kind of stuff. It just compels one to think a bit about this stuff and to think about what's at stake in it because an important part of Bob's work has always

been titling and series-making and stringing stuff together so that there is some sort of—I now see some of the narratives lend to a life which is made of pieces and strung together from one event to another event to another event to another—a diaristic sort of life, day in and day out, like *Groundhog Day* [1993, directed by Harold Ramis]. Bob was just really good at synthesizing material and then I begin to learn that he does it because to Bob it's a functional economy; it's something that he sees as vital to the world—these ideas need to be stated somehow. Bob has those kinds of convictions. He doesn't understand why Leo [Castelli] doesn't want to back ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, 1984–91]. What the hell's the matter with him? We've been coming all this way, we defeated— Vietnam War. He feels those kinds of scales of operation. You could feel it from him. He's a great man. It's fantastic. He just feels it. Fun to watch from the outside in some alienated sense, but very interesting stuff.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Pail for Ganymede*, 1959  
Combine: sheet metal and enamel over wood with crank, gear,  
sealing wax, and tin can  
19 x 5 x 5 1/2 inches (48.3 x 12.7 x 14 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: Okay, let's keep moving chronologically. So you saw the Combines.

Thompson: Yeah, I saw the *Barge* and then I went to Europe and I came back and I needed to write a paper as a senior so I started writing about Bob. I started doing some research myself and there was nothing. A couple of magazine articles, like a picture of him in a gondola with a painting in '64, when he won the Biennale prize [International Grand Prize in Painting, 32nd Venice Biennale, Italy].



Rauschenberg's *Express* (1963) being transported by boat to the Giardini grounds of 32nd Venice Biennale, Italy, June 1964. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved

Something in *Art in America*, which talked about something to do with him and then it began to drift. They're not talking about Bob. Nobody's talking about Bob. They talk about Jasper or they talk about—no, they want to talk about Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, or getting into Color Field, [Clement] Greenberg's on his last leg, Michael [M.] Fried writes "Art and Objecthood"

[1967], very important things are starting to happen. Minimalism comes along, takes Modernism literally. But I'm leaving Warhol out of the whole picture at the moment because why should we rehash what Warhol did? Warhol—and I do not mean this in terms of berating Bob or anything—for my money Warhol is the most important artist of the twentieth century and maybe the twenty-first as well, at least so far. There are a couple of interesting refinements on the position, but if you want to say who got a grip on it, I would say Warhol. But I would say that Bob facilitated it and that without Bob and Jasper and that whole generation, none of that would have happened in quite that way.

One thing that was importantly out of the world of Bob and his art was the homosexual aspect. It just didn't feature. Whereas Andy, if he found somebody didn't get it, he made sure they did, because he was dangerous, politically dangerous, politically aggressive, formally aggressive, and all those kind of things. Those things would all come together and Warhol— There's this discussion, who started Pop art? Was it Bob and Jasper or was it Andy? I believe it was Andy, but I believe what Andy did was—I'll put it this way: Bob and Jasper—Bob came out of nowhere and made art for himself, and he made it for whoever was around who could get on his wavelength. And Jasper, I don't know what Jasper was doing, I have no idea. Living in a bank. He's a very interesting dude. Anybody from South Carolina has got to be interesting. But Warhol made art popular.

People misunderstand Pop art—at least the way I understand it. It's often presented—let's put it this way, there are ways of looking at it. The way that looks at it that says, "I have elevated

something lowly to a higher grade,” like [Jeff] Koons for example. I think that’s mistaken. I believe that what Andy did was, he put art on everybody’s agenda. Everybody has a concept anyway, there’s an atomic concept. None of these agree. Do they all agree with each other? No way. So the game is, who shares? What are the community relations? You asked me about communities. I’ve never felt a membership of a community. I’ve stood around where people gather and I’ve felt the strength of family and also the weakness of family and all of those things. So community is what you organize. I’ve never been able to organize much of anything. I’ve gotten involved in a few tries, but in my crowd, that crowd, they all went up and made communes, like [David] Bradshaw, those performers and all those people, [Deborah] Debbie Hay, all those people who wound up living in communes tooth-by-jowl with one another. It looked like hell to me. I don’t think Bob liked it either. Bob liked his thing and people would visit. There was a certain—there were protocols and so on like that.

Q: Were there specific questions that you were interested in pursuing with your thesis, when you first imagined maybe you’d write about Bob’s work?

Thompson: That’s a very good question. No. I was prepared to make it up as we went along. I’m one of those kinds of people who—I’ll just go and have a look.

Q: What were the requirements of the thesis?

Thompson: None. There had been no such thing. It was actually a dissertation. It was by no means a graduation requirement, apart from writing something about some artist. This was my first taste of academic requirements and I didn't even know what they were asking me for. But I was going to write something because—the first thing I thought was interesting was that there was nothing in the papers about it. Everybody's like, this is the sixties, man. Why aren't people talking about this? What's going on here? Because there's something here as much as there is something over there. For me the Beatles and all that stuff—that whole world, English invasion; it was a world of global convergence, an international sort of thing, and Rauschenberg seemed to be propitiously a part of it.

Then I lost track of him though. I really did lose track of him because I got involved in my own stuff. And the next thing I saw were these *Carnal Clocks* [1969], which were really like, I thought, “Whew, New York, man.” I didn't know what to think. I really didn't know what to think. This technology tick, I didn't understand that. I can see it's something interesting to do and those are fascinating people and opportunities turn up, and I wound up doing some strange, I suppose, relatively off-base kind of things, but one of the things I learned about was going where you kind of belong. There was nowhere Bob didn't feel like he belonged. Me, I'm not comfortable everywhere. In fact I'm not comfortable much of anywhere, comparatively speaking. It was interesting that he could tolerate my presence because I'm edgy and Bob don't like edgy very much.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Audition (Carnal Clock)*, 1969  
Mirrored Plexiglas and silkscreen ink on Plexiglas  
in metal frame with concealed electric lights and  
clock movement  
67 x 60 x 18 inches (170.2 x 152.4 x 45.7 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: What do you mean?

Thompson: For him I'm a very straight-arrow type of guy. Like he can't figure me out, like the only thing he knows for sure is that I'm pissed off and he doesn't quite even know what that's about, and thinks that I need loosening up a little bit or something like that. I don't need loosening up. I need turning loose.

Q: All right, well let's—

Thompson: Is that enough about me? It gives you a background?

Q: Well yeah. So you just talked about being in school and the possibility that you were going to pursue Bob's work. So you didn', because there was no material.

Thompson: Yeah, there was no material plus my life changed. The Vietnam War was on and it turned out that I was not obliged to go. I had gotten into the music business and I made a first album and within the year I'd made four albums [*The Parable of Arable Land*, 1967; *Coconut Hotel*, recorded in 1967, released in 1995; *Live 1967*, live album recorded in 1967, released in 1998; *God Bless the Red Krayola and All Who Sail With It*, 1968].

Q: So tell me about how Red Krayola came to be.

Thompson: I went to Europe in '65 and looked around. '63 is when everything started; by '65 the dust had settled and you could sort of see who was who and what was what. I made a little tour, I went to England and went to Paris first because I had always dreamed of going to France. I went to France and sat there and found out that the Parisians would be very happy if you weren't there. At least that's how they acted. They didn't mind having your money, but they'd be happy if you weren't there. It was like this on the street corners. I was twenty and sufficiently shirty not to pay any damned attention to what anybody cared about. So I did that and I stood there for a while and looked at what was going on in the record shops and what was going on in music and realized that there were only three or four or five acts that could call themselves international in any truly significant sense and that was the Beatles, the [Rolling] Stones, the Kinks, the Who. I'm running out of room here already. And a couple of figures like Eric Clapton and the Yardbirds a little bit.

So I began to get a picture of music and I had made this music and some folk music in America, and I knew [Bob] Dylan was only—Dylan and John Fahey—apart from that I really thought there was nothing that I would—I mean, I knew all about it. I didn't love anything. I liked various bits and pieces, but none of it moved me. I always wanted to make something. I liked singing. People told me, "You can't sing a lick, you shouldn't do that," and so on, when I was a kid. That didn't stop me necessarily. So when I went to Europe and I came back from my research of looking in record shops in Britain and seeing the lay of the market, I came to Bartheleme and we had been fishing around. I had been making movies when I met him, I had a 16-millimeter Bolex and I was making movies, and I asked him to be my star and he said he would, so he was my star. So I filmed, we filmed, something like that. We had a 500-foot roll of film and we had maybe 400 feet of it full already and we were getting ready—we had more coming.

But when I came back from Europe I said, "Dude, the way forward, I think, is to start a band." I'd already done a few folk house gigs, coffeehouse gigs, sung a couple of songs, done one thing on the radio, and he said, "No, you should do that on your own." I said, "Listen, I'm not doing anything on my own. Forget it. I know what I can do on my own, that's really not very interesting. Could we please do this together?" And so he agreed and we then destroyed the film that we had made. We drove in his car and I had reeled it out of the window and it just disappeared behind us; a cavalier relation to hundreds of dollars of production, much of it paid for by my wonderful, delightful, supportive, ever-supportive mother, and so on and so on and so on.

Then we started the band and we realized right away that the thing was, you need to write songs. We could play a few songs. We'd managed to get a hold of five, six, seven. People had to take notice of us partly because in the social world that Barthelme moved in nontrivially and then when we met [Steve] Cunningham, it got even more intense because Cunningham was a connection to a real community of underground people in Houston. He was a freak. They called him Lurch. He had been roadie for John Ike [Walton], a drummer for the 13th Floor Elevators, he'd come out here to California and played Jew's harp on the record with a guy named Malachi [*Holy Music*, 1966] with incense sticking out of everywhere—oooooh, twelve-string, this kind of drone music that was coming down. Cunningham knew all of this stuff and he knew all these people around the pop scene. He started playing bass with us along with a woman named Bonnie Emerson and a harp player named Danny Schact, who was an interesting figure, who marched in the anti-Vietnam War parade wearing part of a military tunic and was indicted for it. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court and it was thrown out because it was street theater and freedom of speech. But they took him all the way to the Supreme Court for it.

So we started the band and it was the way forward. Within nine months we'd made our first album and ten months, two albums, invited to the Berkeley Folk Festival [California in 1967]. We were invited to the Berkeley Folk Festival because I was standing around the University of St. Thomas one day outside the gallery there. Dr. MacAgy was long gone by that time. But Mrs. [Dominique] de Menil was running the joint, more or less, and there was a show up, I can't remember what, a painting maybe. She put on some killer shows. Anyway, Kurt von Meier,

professor of art history out here at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] at the time, he was in town and he was a friend of the de Menils. We met and he was writing a book of the history of rock-and-roll so naturally I got chatting with him, one thing and another and he said, “What are y’all doing?” By this time we had made our first album; we then made *Coconut Hotel*. I don’t know if you know this record, this is the abstract record, a hundred percent absolute music. He went, “Uh, if I got you in the Berkeley Folk Festival, would you play that? What would you play?” We said, “Oh, something like that, along those lines.” He went [clicks tongue] and he called his friend Barry [Olivier], the organizer of the festival at Berkeley. They tried to get us into Monterey [International Pop Festival, California] as well, but that was a business gig all the way. Lou Adler, record companies. Fair enough.

So we went to the top like a rocket and pow, exploded, and that was the end of it. We got to Berkeley, they asked us would there be anybody we’d like to meet in California. We were hanging around with [Eugene] Ed Denson and we said, “John Fahey.” So John showed up at Berkeley where we were. We had a freak-out conference and then he sat in with us and played, and that’s as close as I have to a hero as far as music is concerned. Amazing dude. You know that music?

Q: Not well.

Thompson: Just, any of it. *Blind Joe Death* [1959, by John Fahey], I could listen to it forever. It’s just gorgeous stuff. It’s perfect. It was wonderful because one of the things that was going on

with us was that we just wanted to fool around and have some fun and do some things. But at the same time, having studied a little bit about art and the history of these ideas, we had some sense that the music had a history in fact. It didn't happen, just start yesterday, that there was suddenly this new way of making music. It doesn't come out of nowhere. There's no such thing. We deliberately saw it and we placed ourselves at the end of a very, very long line, and there was no place to go anymore structurally.

Q: Who were you seeing as before you, your predecessors in that long line?

Thompson: Cage. [Karlheinz] Stockhausen. After that, I don't know—[Stephen Michael] Steve Reich was there before us in some sense, but he'd be the only one that I would be prepared to say that I knew anything about. Max Neuhaus maybe. [Frederic] Fred Rzewski. There were a lot of people that one knew about who were doing things. I knew who La Monte Young was, I knew he'd been a saxophone player, I know he's playing cool-school West Coast jazz and so on, which didn't interest me in the least. We were interested not in just getting into the business, we were interested in smashing it as much as possible. I always said that was part of it.

When we played the Berkeley Folk Festival, I came out and leaned my guitar against my amp and walked off, and it started feeding back and everything, and we went from there, down, and everybody said we killed a dog this night, that kind of stuff. The next day there was Ralph [J.] Gleason and we had a press conference. [Joseph Allen] Joe [McDonald] of Country Joe and the Fish and all of us were sitting on the stage and Ralph Gleason says, "Well, I guess we have to

start with what happened last night. What was that you were doing?” I went, “I don’t know. We’re just doing what we’re doing.” They went, “Oh, okay,” and then they all tried to explain it.

Q: What happened next?

Thompson: We recorded a bunch of stuff with John Fahey and the record company wouldn’t bring us back to Texas unless I brought the tapes back. We didn’t know—we didn’t have a lawyer, we didn’t know what we were doing. We were naïve, completely naïve, and idiotic about the whole thing. So we brought the tapes back and then I went back to California, messed around for a while, played with some fellows, shared some rehearsal space with the United States of America, with [Joseph] Joe Byrd and his band. Nico came in one day, she was said to be looking for guitar players. I was sitting playing guitar and I looked up and there was Nico at the door, and she looked at me, I looked at her, and we knew. No. She knew; I knew. No way.

Q: Because?

Thompson: She—the Velvet Underground? No. Part of the beauty of [Jimi] Hendrix and the Velvets was that they—you didn’t have to do that. I didn’t have to be a guitar virtuoso, Hendrix had guitar covered. Anybody’s interested in some guitar music, get you a Hendrix record. If those are the things that move you, get you one of those. I’m interested in sounds. That’s where I can be of any help to you, by all means get you one of these. That kind of thing. So it’s a competition of ideas. We got to California, we came out here, and sat in Los Angeles—sat in

Venice the day before we went to Berkeley and there was the Angry Arts Festival [1967] and we played at the pavilion there. I remember Canned Heat were there and I sat there with [Alan] Al Wilson and we made fun of him for being interested in the blues. Not really. We appreciated what they were doing, but we couldn't help poking a little fun at it for being old-fashioned. Because by that time we all believed that there was something avant—there was somewhere to go, that there was a leading edge. The discourse tended in that direction at the time. It wasn't until the seventies that I really was able to shed the whole avant-garde thing, relations. It was hard. Had to go through politics to do that.

Q: Can you speak a little bit about how you might have been incorporating some of the conceptual art theory into the music that you were pursuing at the time?

Thompson: I didn't see any difference between them. Ideas are ideas are ideas. Concepts, modes of presentation, and then modal realism kicks in and you do what needs to be done in terms of the functional relationship potential to the productive neighborhood. But we were anxious not to be seen as artists, an art band, I really didn't want that at all. Because I saw that the integrity of the relationship depends on the idea that music is an autonomous or at least semi-autonomous practice, with its own formal constraints and formal identity, and does things that only music can do, and only sounds under the rubric of music can do these kinds of things. Those are the things I was interested in. My conflicts were with people over noise because noise, people threw the word noise at us a lot. I had always understood noise as a relation out of information theory, like

just, I'm not, for my purposes it's noise, doesn't fit with the program somehow. Then I had to rethink these things a number of times obviously.

But I was always on the lookout. I found Rauschenberg because I was on the lookout, looking for something else, something that had not been done, something that hadn't been chewed to pieces. Though it had its roots in the past and you could see where it had come from, the tradition had its own identity, it had its own character. It was important to find one's own voice from my point of view. The endgame strategy was thrust upon me by the realization that logic goes on, but forms don't—that forms can be exhausted, permutationally exhausted.

The thing that happened after us was Process art. Minimalism triumphed over Modernism by taking the language literally: the edge, the surface, [Donald] Don Judd's writing, the black line runs three centimeters and it runs from the top of the thing to the bottom and blah-blah-blah-blah; and he's just talking about absolutely, purely descriptive relations and technical relations. It's like reading [Alain Robbe-]Grillet books, Grillet novels. All those things are somehow quite alike and none of them will do for me. I'm always looking for—uh-uh. I'm going, uh-uh, uh-uh, uh-uh. Because all these systems that are presented, they depend on a kind of totality in extension, at least in those days they did. They've gotten more porous and more projective and more flexible in our times than they were in those days. In those days they were very ideologized and people were looking for some position, signature position. Conceptual artists made Conceptual art ridiculous by insisting that only they were doing certain kinds of things, when in

fact it depended on the fact that this was something that was universal to the operators and wasn't metaphysics or tropes strictly.

Q: And were your bandmates as interested in pursuing these ideas?

Thompson: No. Barthelme left the band after we came back from California and went to New York and started making art. He became a Conceptual artist and then quickly exhausted the limits of it because it was language-mediated. His brother is a writer and he was fighting shy of writing anyway probably. Then we made that book *Rangoon* together in '70 [note: text and photographs by Barthelme, illustrations by Thompson]. I don't know if you've ever seen that. I'll show it to you before you go. I was just trying to get going. Production was the way forward—produce something. It's an induction effect. You're going to have to deal with the world on my terms here. And the difference it makes is my thing and the world, or the world without my thing, and those are the differences.

Q: Okay. So you spoke about John Cage as an important influence on—

Thompson: He had done a lot of exhaustive thinking on it, and I'd listened to some of his music, and I had an appreciation for intellect and he studied with [Arnold] Schoenberg and Schoenberg was the only person that bothered to make an alternative system. Conceptualism was very careful to present itself as a movement, but it had roots that went all the way back to [Édouard] Manet and the beginnings of Modernism, maybe even [Gustave] Courbet, depending on who you were

talking to. My roots, they went back to [Johann Sebastian] Bach. Baroque music. Baroque ideas as made perfect and as perfectly expressed in the syntaxes, if you want—as I thought of it in certain ways. Bach as grammar and [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart as syntax. Mozart is just content and Hendrix, exhaustive. Everything you could possibly think to do with this thing, he did it.

Q: So when you met Bob all those years later, did you recognize him as someone who had emerged out of some of the same influences?

Thompson: I didn't know where he came from. I just knew he had an aura about him and magic about him. One of the sweetest things about him was that he was open to the world enough to be interested in somebody like me as well. He was not snooty or weird or any of that kind of stuff. He was okay. He was a perfect straight-up dude. You could talk to him and he was just ready for Freddy. If Freddy rolled up, "Freddy!"

Q: Okay, before we move on, I want to talk a little bit about Dominique de Menil and the role that she played in Houston. Although you said you didn't feel like you belonged to a community, the role she played in creating a—

Thompson: I was on the fringes of it, on the margins of it. Helen Winkler was a friend of mine and Sarah Cannon was a friend of mine, and people who worked closely with them. Fredericka Hunter was a good friend of mine and still is. Sarah I've lost track of and Helen I've lost track of

and they're probably glad. But I knew all of these people, I went to school with a lot of them, and the de Menils were always quite nice. You could always pick up a dollar painting the place when they were getting ready for an exhibition. It was quite a lot of fun to be involved in making something happen, something else. It had this international aspect. They had Henry Geldzahler flying in, bringing in slides of the latest Larry Poons paintings to look at. It was on the ground. [Marcel] Duchamp came to the school, Texas Southern University. "Who? Marcel Duchamp? He's coming here?" I was exposed to a wide range of people and to a whole order of people—Mr. and Mrs. de Menil were power players and they had the wherewithal to play.

Something happened to them in New York. They didn't wind up with control of the Museum of Modern Art [New York]. Schlumberger [Limited] is in Houston. They got a nice Philip [C.] Johnson house. One night they brought the Lovin' Spoonful to Houston to play and the Lovin' Spoonful had already crapped in their mess kit by turning in their drug dealers in Miami.

[INTERRUPTION]

Thompson: We went over to her house and one of my colleagues FRB Rapho—[Michael J.] Mike Metyko—he was an artist and a good friend of ours, and he had on a burnoose and he had a little beard and he had a square sort of face and sunglasses and he could pass, if you didn't know. And at one point Mr. and Mrs. de Menil came and said, [whispers] "Mayo, who is that?" They were worried that he was Prince somebody from somewhere and they didn't know. And they're in the oil business in Houston, Texas. I told them who he was and they went, "Ah, okay."

Q: How do you think they thought about the community that they were maybe curating or creating or bringing together?

Thompson: I think that they thought that they were using their money to good purpose and that they were using wealth in the classical Renaissance tradition—what wealthy people ought to do with their money is to sustain institutions. They tried to make a peace with the Basilian Fathers and couldn't because the Basilian Fathers answer to Rome or wherever; they're not about to make the kind of deal that the de Menils want to do, which is to maintain a certain kind of grip over it to make sure that the thing goes on. You see what happened to the Warburg Institute [London]. Time has changed and people's attitudes toward what is heirloom and legacy and all that stuff—they knew what the ins and outs were, they'd been around power their whole lives. She had anyway. You could just tell that they knew what was going on.

I was standing with him and a group of students one day and he had an African head, a terracotta in his hand and whoosh, to the floor. We all went [gasp], looked at him, and he went, “So, um, as I was saying—” I would later come to the conclusion that he's got a box of these things and he does this routinely just to teach them the way the world is. I don't know, I'm being cynical. But I think what they wanted was—they were looking for someplace to make permanent. You see this reproduced most heavily in their daughter Philippa [de Menil, now Fariha Friedrich] and the Dia [Art] Foundation and the kind of trouble they got into with even [Robert] Bob Whitman, of all people. A very casual player, a friend of Bob's, who somehow got wound up by Don Judd and

these other people who were insisting for whatever reason. That's the way I see it anyway. I could be way off base. I now see it. I have friends who are thinking they have to set up foundations and stuff to take care of these kinds of affairs. I understand how complex the art business is. It's the most fascinating business around because its symbolism actually counts and matters.

Q: And what about personally? Do you think the trajectory of your life would have been different had they not been a presence in Texas? The de Menils.

Thompson: I'm sure it would've been considerably different. There were a number of people I would not have known. They were a connection to the Warhol world. They were a connection to all of it, not just this groovy guy and that groovy guy and that groovy woman. It was everybody: René Magritte sculptures, the whole dealio. You could just see how connected up it was. It was full-scale. I would have been absolutely different, completely different. I was completely fortunate to be exposed to this kind of possibility even if I wasn't in the position to take advantage of it for myself because I just didn't have the sensibility for it.

Q: For?

Thompson: For belonging.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: That's what it seemed to me. I didn't know what the idea was. I was not committed to it. I could see it in broad political terms, but I was never satisfied by any of those things. I was on my way. Not long after that I found Marxist-Leninist ideas and I got very deep—I pursued this to the end of—like systematic action and respect of an idea and respect of other people and their lives as well. We're not going to intervene in your life. We think that you should think this way about these ideas. It took me a while to get that far. Here were these people ready to lay it on you. I've never been that committed to anything.

Q: Were you making art at that time?

Thompson: Trying my hand at this and that. I went to ask Barthelme what does it take to be an artist and he said, "Make some paintings," and I thought, oh god. It all seemed so easy to me. Really seemed like really empty ideas. I have some wicked ideas about Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* [1953] for example, some really nasty ideas about that one. Because I can think permutationally and I can think logically and I can think about what else might be done. So I'm always a little bit outside of these things is all I can say.



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

Q: Okay. What are some of your nasty ideas about the *de Kooning*?

Thompson: Oh, the *Erased de Kooning* is not the piece of paper. That's part of it. Where are all the crumblings? Could get them and put them in a little urn and make it really much more horrible than it already is. More terrifying than it already is. At some sort of level I think it's exciting; that's why people do it. Because it's just genuinely playing with fire to knock on Willem de Kooning's door and say, "Can I have a drawing of yours to erase?" That's cheeky.

Q: Yup.

Thompson: But then having been around Bob, walking in New York, and walking in and out of 420 West Broadway, I'd see Cage on Saturday; he'd be going in and out looking at the galleries,

and Cage and your eyes catch like that, but I never stopped and talked to him and said, “Professor, can I talk to you?” Not my style.

Q: Okay. One thing that was interesting speaking to [Richard] Dickie Landry is that he said he always felt more at ease amongst the art community than the musical community.

Thompson: Musicians are like surfers.

Q: What do you mean?

Thompson: That’s my wave motherfucker.

Q: Okay. So one thing that I asked him if—

Thompson: Plus the eating’s better and the living’s better. Go ahead, please.

Q: Well, it was interesting because he characterized them as almost being different tribes and I wondered if you would have been moving back and forth between two worlds—

Thompson: There are two worlds of music and one of them is Philip Glass and those people who are in the art world, and then there’s the music world. Philip Glass is now part of the music world of course. You reach a certain plateau and then the boundaries get to be irrelevant, but at

the end of the day, without the art world, Philip Glass wouldn't be where he is today. Let's put it like that. Me, I got where I am without the art world and made a point of it and now I'm ready to go back and make peace, be all real friendly and everything. I have an exhibition coming up in October; if you're in New York I hope you'll drop by. Greene Naftali [Gallery, New York]. First solo exhibition [*Mayo Thompson*, 2015]. Should be really funny.

Q: Cool.

Thompson: I don't know.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: But Dickie Landry and I, we come from the same neck of the woods. His family's 200 miles from where I was born, right there in south Louisiana, Cajun families. When I got to New York, there he is living in Chatham Square with a whole clan of people, Tina Girouard and Richard Peck and a bunch of the elite people, and they're getting together at night and improvising being in Louisiana, making gumbo and stuff like that. Well I get invited over one day. We start chatting and I ask Dickie to play saxophone for me one time on something I was working on. I was getting ready to burn some material demos for a record I was going to make. I couldn't figure out what to do.

After I made my solo album, I couldn't figure out quite what to do. I needed to make another album, and this Greek I had gotten to know, Manos Hadjidakis, he invited me to come to Athens and make a record with him. So I was getting together some material and I was recording in his apartment on Fifty-seventh Street, and Dickie came up there and he played saxophone, and we'd just get talking. You could see what kind of relation it is and plus we ran into each other one time in Paris, went to a Clark [Virgil] Terry [Jr.] show. He's really a musician. I'm not like him even. I'm not really even a musician. I don't belong—I'm not trying to make too much out of this, but I'm just telling you, I'm touchy about where I go because it's based on how it feels and it doesn't feel right. But his musical thing—he could play like hell. I saw him one night, he played at the Kitchen [New York] and he had his saxophone and I've seen him do what a lot of tenor players do when they're really frustrated, they scream for twenty minutes, this primal scream. I've seen people do it in Europe. Then later at Fredericka Hunter's I see some framed thing, nice spruce frame, nice orange passe-partout, and so on, and I'm standing with Dickie Landry. Wow. I'll say everybody's got to try their hand. It's tempting. There's a lot of funny money lying around. If only for that, just to pick up the funny money, and have more fun! I think that's a legitimate way to approach these things. If it turns into something else, if you wind up at the White House getting the Nixon medal? So what. Fine. Cool.

I was working at the gallery, at [Patrick] Painter [Santa Monica, California], and these two students came in and talked to me. They were talking about [Edward] Ed Ruscha showing at some gallery—they didn't think much of it—in the boondocks someplace. I said to them, "That means that you too could show there someday." I fancy I'm a realist, I have a reasonable grip on

what it takes to be realistic about what's going on right here. I don't fancy I know everything by any stretch of the imagination. You just begin to know and this town is MoCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles], Eli [L.] Broad, [Frank O.] Gehry, Ed Ruscha. A lot of sitting around and seeing that stuff.

Q: When would you see the *Carnal Clocks* fit into this timeline?

Thompson: When I started losing interest in what was going on in visual art because I got interested in Conceptual art more than anything. Minimalism had no effect on me; it just seemed to me to be objects, the same thing under a slightly different premise, like a little more literalistic, a little bit more open with respect to the materials. Conceptual art was the promise of no object and this caught my imagination and interest because I'm a musician, I don't make objects. I make ephemera, phenomena. We make records, but it's only a digital relation, it's only on when it's on, otherwise no existo—like a novel or a book when you open it. This was before everything had been turned into a charged object.

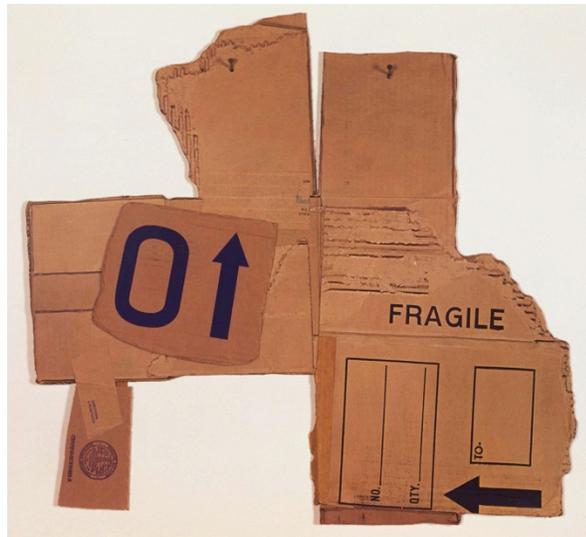
Q: And you saw the *Carnal Clocks* in New York?

Thompson: Yeah. I was going back and forth a lot, traveling. I wasn't able to get out of Texas—took me a while. '71, '72, I finally made it to New York. '73 is when I encountered Rauschenberg. The *Carnal Clocks* were old when I saw them, they'd been around for a while. I knew that Leo couldn't sell them—couldn't give them away. Next time I saw Rauschenberg,

when he really caught my eye, was with the *Cardbirds* [1971], the *Venetian* series [1972–73], the show at Leo's [*Robert Rauschenberg: Venetian Series*, Leo Castelli, New York, 1973] where he had a bathtub and a bottle floating on a stick [*Sor Aqua (Venetian)*, 1973], these things hanging up, and some cardboard boxes staked out on the gondolier, things like that. There I saw the Bob I recognized.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Sor Aqua (Venetian)*, 1973  
Water-filled bathtub, wood, metal, rope, and glass jug  
98 x 120 x 41 inches (248.9 x 304.8 x 104.1 cm)  
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Gift of the Caroline Wiess Law Foundation



*Cardbird VI*, 1971  
Collage print with corrugated cardboard, tape, photo offset, and screenprint  
26 x 28 inches (66 x 71.1 cm)  
From an edition of 75, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: The Bob you recognized from the Combines?

Thompson: Yeah, the Bob I recognized from the guy who knows how to put stuff together and not who's striving for effect with technological up-to-date-ness. Performance art—I know something about it. I can remember—I wouldn't call 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering [1966] performance art. Judson [Memorial] Church [New York] stuff—that's dance, it's not performance art. Hate to be categorically strict about these things. But Bob properly belongs to the world where there was still a dance troupe and that kind of stuff, before Vito Acconci hid under the stairs and made us use our imaginations and think all manner of evil stuff was going on, while he was probably sitting there with French fries and watching a football game. [Note: refers to Acconci's *Seedbed*, first performed at Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1972]

No, these are conviction players. I know that they lived it. I know they lived it. [Joseph] Beuys came and sat in a cage with a coyote and that was the beginning of performance. [Note: refers to Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974.] Carolee Schneemann and Warhol's crowd as well. Which comes out of—that's also like Jack Smith, that's theater and cinema, importantly I think. Theater is something I'm fascinated in. I love theater. I'm trying hard to get in there. I've written music for a ballet of [Michael] Mike Smith, which is coming up [*Excuse Me!?! . . . I'm looking for the "Fountain of Youth"*, 2015]. I'm working on an opera for twenty-five, thirty years now. It's called *Victorine*.

The thing about Bob is this— By the time I saw it again, I began to realize that it has to do with what you can do and what you can deploy. When I went to work for him, I didn't know what he was doing anymore. I'd lost touch altogether. It was '73. I had maybe seen the *Carnal Clocks*

and thought, “Okay, eh. Erotic imagery, okay, on occasion. I don’t care.” Then with that Greek guy, I went to Europe to make that record and sat in Athens for a long time. He was going back and forth to Beirut, which was still the Riviera of the south Mediterranean, and he was also suffering from some health issues, which made it difficult for him to do everything that we were supposed to do. So I sat there for a month and a half, and finally I sat for two weeks in Athens, and then finally went to Crete and sat there for a month. Finally I told him, “Dude, this ain’t happening. I’m out.” I went back via Paris because there was nothing to go back to in New York. It was really—now what? We have to think this over again one more time. In Paris, walking by Ileana [Sonnabend]’s place—this is the end of August—and there sat Bob. Christine [Kozlov], my wife—we married in ’76, later, but at the time we were together—she said, “Oh, there’s Bob Rauschenberg.”

Q: And they knew each other?

Thompson: They knew each other from New York. It was Bob: “Christine!” Then we were part of his entourage in Paris. That’s where I got my start with him. They were writing, it was a show of Untitled Press [Inc.], they were trying to write a press release. And, “He can write.” I wrote the press release and they liked it. “Hey, I can do something, wow. I like your shoes too. Cool, plain brown. Like that.”

Q: Who else was there at the time? You used the word entourage. Who else was a part of that?

Thompson: Well, Ileana and Michael Sonnabend, and Ealan Wingate were around. Sarkis Zabunyan, a Turk, very interesting artist. Worked for Ileana in those days. [Robert] Bob Petersen. When I say entourage, I mean one felt that one was traveling in kind of an ensemble. I have problems when things happened. Sometimes I conflate events. Did Ileana have that show, was that when Ileana had the show? I think it is, maybe.

Q: In '73?

Thompson: Yeah, '73. Ileana had a show where she showed—every year somebody was responsible to show what was up, like a survey of what was interesting stuff and that year it was her turn. Bob was in the show, Warhols were in the show, Robert Morris, Philip Glass was brought over and the ensemble, they played, and Joan Jonas was brought to town. [Note: *Aspects de l'Art Actuel*, Musée Galliera, Paris, 1973. Organized by Galerie Ileana Sonnabend for Festival d'Automne.] Lots and lots of stuff. Giulio Paolini, a bunch of people, et cetera, et cetera. So she gave me a job because I could speak French. There I was and I got along with all these people, seemed to know them, so she asked me if I'd like to have a job, offered me a job in Paris and I said, I would be happy to help her with this festival thing, but after that I'm out, I don't want a job in a gallery, thank you. I didn't say that, I just said, "Thank you, I'm going to go back to New York when this is over."

I worked for her and assisted Joan Jonas in a performance. Kurt Munkacsi and I did one night, and shepherded Philip Glass and his crowd to dinner one night, and learned a lesson about who

pays for dinner—it's not the dealer always. But I thought it was and I had this money from her and I paid for it. I said, "I thought that that was what we're supposed to do," and she said, "It doesn't matter, just don't do it anymore." I learned some home truths from Ileana Sonnabend. I learned a great deal about the art business from her.

Q: Yeah? What else?

Thompson: Just standing next to her and Rauschenberg in Florida, like Bob was talking about something that was going on someplace, he's going, "Rawr, rawr, rawr, and I tried to tell them and I tried, then I tried to explain such—" She said, "Bob, Bob, Bob," the old aristocrats' sort of, "Never complain, never explain." [Grumble] Yeah, yeah, I wrote this down. It hasn't stopped me complaining, mind you. Explanation can be a device also. That's where she and I might slightly differ. She knew when to explain and when not to. How frank should one speak about these things? Ileana, she would do anything to sell a work of art, to anybody, at anybody's expense. All in the name of fun.

Q: Because it was a game?

Thompson: I'm being friendly. Power player, power broker. The legends, planeloads of Jewish people brought from Dallas to buy [Anselm] Kiefers and she doesn't deal Kiefers. How did she get so many Kiefers that she could accommodate enough people—maybe it's not a 747-load full. That whole phraseology, the formulation, and that's what it was. I didn't make that up. It's like,

who. You know that's the kind of business it is. People are various and nice, so nice sometimes. It's a rough, tough business and I got to see some nasty sides of it, standing next to Bob in Venice [Italy]. Girl, there's a lot of stuff here.

Rauschenberg, he's amazing because he could just weather all of this stuff—people, food, alcohol, experience, long hours. He just had the stamina of a giant. Me, I have to go home and go to bed.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: You told me how you met Bob, and let's talk about how that relationship progressed and the projects that you were involved in. How did you end up becoming involved in working on the *Early Egyptian* series [1973–74]?



Robert Rauschenberg  
Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), 1973  
Cardboard, sand, Day-Glo paint, wood, fabric, and  
fabric belt  
54 1/4 x 35 x 78 inches (137.8 x 88.9 x 198.1 cm)  
Hess Art Collection, Switzerland

Thompson: During the time that Ileana had that show, Bob also had a huge show in Paris where he was making the *Early Egyptian* series [note: *Early Egyptian Series*, Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, 1973]. Because we were friendly and Christine is an artist— was an artist, a Conceptual artist, one of the first people to make it in fact and if the history of it is ever written, and I know it will be, she will be vindicated—he trusted her; trusted her eye, her taste, and somehow her approval was important to him and he valued it in some sense. I don't mean it was essential in any way, but he cherished it and it was important to him to have an understanding with her. She was an extraordinary woman; wild is the traditional description of women who do the kinds of things that she would do, which was anything she fucking felt like, whenever. So everything turned on that. The fact that I was accepted by her was important, plus the fact that she could see that I respected him. I have this horrible—if I don't respect somebody, they see it immediately. They feel it immediately and don't like it. Probably because I want them to know that I don't respect them sometimes and I bother them somehow, without realizing it. Body language or whatever. And I ain't the passive-aggressive type. I'm just plain aggressive. Without even realizing it, of course, one is passive-aggressive, that's the whole idea.

But anyway, there was an economy there, which had to do with who one was, who one belonged to, what was going on, what was important, the trend of ideas let's say. And always with this progressive involvement, like where art and the art world are part of the good, and other ideas which are unsustainable in reality. But that belonged to this positivism and Bob's a positivist, an extremely—a force for positive, a force for good. He and the Dalai Lama must have got on like a

house on fire. Just that kind of thing. The Dalai Lama has to find Bob. With Bob, one met Abba Eban and Mrs. [Suzy] Eban, and [Theodor] Teddy Kollek, the mayor of Jerusalem, and Shimon Peres, and that order of people. [Jacob K.] Jake Javits, Marion Javits, Geraldo Rivera, who was not on the other side at that time. It was that level of activity and that kind of people, plus Bob likes to be around people who will find something that they can do, who can do something and who are prepared to do whatever. And me, I'm not proud, I'll sweep, pick up the dogs, take the dry cleaning, go shopping, whatever you like. Want something written? Fine.

So there was a certain can-do environment. "Ah, some kids, a new generation," that kind of thing, some fresh blood, and Bob sustaining, and Bob having come through the firestorm of the tax people and getting his world sorted out and having his New York facility and his Florida facility, and having to pay a whopper of a bill to keep that thing going every month. I saw the papers and I was like, you want to know the number? It was like seventy grand a month to keep his empire afloat in 1973, '74. That's a lot of money in '73, '74, dollars in the time of [James Earl] Jimmy Carter [Jr.] and the recession going, gas lines and dah-dah-dah. He represented a kind of security and also, for me, it was just fascinating to think, this is more fun than you're going to have anywhere else. Why not? Let's see what goes on. So we did. After working with him in Paris, somehow we let him know that we needed to do something. And Hisachika Takahashi was also there, and he made a place for us, and we went to work for him.

Q: How long were you all together in Paris? That festival?

Thompson: I don't know. Not long.

Q: Okay. So there was a talk—

Thompson: This was a crash course in “yeah, it happens, wow, look.” And that's the way things were in the sixties and seventies. So I was used to things unfolding quickly, not having to sit on your hands and wait to see if somebody makes up their mind, do you or don't you, or will you or won't you. I like that fluidity that Bob had also and Bob liked that I can talk on the telephone and those kind of things—I'm not intimidated by that kind of situation. So I could represent him and stand in for him in certain circumstances and they could trust me also. I'm not going to mess him around.

Q: And so Hisachika made room for you in his New York life?

Thompson: Hisachika, no. Bob. Hisachika accepted that new dogs were joining the kennel.

Yeah, Hisachika's Japanese. His father was a kamikaze pilot. My father fought with his father.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: That kind of thing. Very competitive fellow.

Q: Okay, well, tell me what happened when you go back to New York.

Thompson: No, wonderful dude. Fascinating guy. Really, my first encounter after the war. The only Japanese I'd ever seen before that was a wrestler, Duke Keomuka [Martin Hisao Tanaka].

Q: Tell me what happens when you all get back to New York.

Thompson: We moved into [381] Lafayette Street and just started doing what needed to be done. Bob went to Florida eventually, went to work down there, communications back and forth, this and that to do in New York. It was just a mundane sphere, day in and day out sort of life stuff, things that needed to be done for the house. When Bob would come to town—get ready for boogie. Here comes the butcher with a box of steaks, a hundred steaks, and the turtle needs to be washed, and all of that kind of stuff. This needs to be taken over to Leo's house and we get over to Leo's office and there's Louise, and it turns out to be, I only knew later, it was Louise Lawler for crying out loud. Do you know who she is?

Q: Mm-hmm.

Thompson: Yeah. I didn't at the time. Says, "Hi, Louise." She and I, actually I feel have quite a bit in common. I see those photographs of hers, I know that world, because I sat in those back rooms as well and took a few photographs myself, here and there, of the back rooms of the art world. That was the idea behind the film eventually [note: *Mostly About Rauschenberg*, 1975,

unfinished, directed by Rauschenberg, Christine Kozlov, and Mayo Thompson]. You should see this film because it's an important part of my part of the story and Christine's story with Bob.

Q: I want to talk about the film. I was hoping we would talk about it tomorrow.

Thompson: Sure. No, in the first instance it was really like doing things and going places and being part of it and showing up and being there at dinnertime and going to the restaurants and support, support, support, support. "Goodnight, Bob, blah-blah-blah," "Good morning, Bob, la-la-la," that kind of stuff. Like family life. High tolerance and then some kind of understanding for the real schedule because it's productive, it's an environment, it's a factory. An industry. Bob Rauschenberg incorporated. And he cranks it out and the guy's a rigorous worker, a hard worker, in his studio every day, all day, until the end of the day. A typical workday, you get up in the morning, have something to drink, a little something to eat, and then one o'clock, into the studio, come back for a light little lunch, and then back in the evening until ten-thirty, eleven o'clock. Then come back, sit down, watch TV until bedtime, twelve o'clock bed, one o'clock bed. And the morning, same thing again. Every day, every day, cranking it, and on his own, encouraging. We got to go places with him, like to—I can't think of the lady's name, she had a very distinguished press on Long Island. Tanya?

Q: Grosman.

Thompson: [Tatyana] Tanya Grosman [Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York].  
Went out there with him when he did something, yeah. When he was at the Museum of Modern Art, when he accepted a prize for his graphic works, and they were embarrassed because they didn't even own a painting of his. Not one. They had borrowed something, and it was the painting that [Douglas] Doug Christmas later went to jail for, having sold twice.

Q: What was the trip to Grosman's?

Thompson: He was doing some edition with her.

Q: And you?

Thompson: We went along. "Want to go out there? I'm going out to Tanya Grosman's. Want to?" "Sure Bob, let's go."

Q: Did you feel like—was there a point at which you had a formal role assisting, like as a studio—

Thompson: I never had a title.

Q: Were you assisting with the work itself?

Thompson: Never.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: Christine would be asked. Bob Petersen would be. I might stand there and hand something out, but I was not a studio assistant in the usual sense, no, by no means. I'm a music guy. We'd sit there and watch music programs and in the seventies they were like Creedence Clearwater [Revival] and the *Little Rascals* or whatever, and I would sit there and sneer, and Bob would say, "Why don't you go do something then?" That kind of thing. I said, "Don't worry, I've done something." Not getting into it, but—

Q: Did he know your music?

Thompson: I don't think so. I never visited it upon him. He liked Janis Joplin and I don't care if people don't—the Red Krayola was not something to like, it was something to know about. Those who like it, I think, wow, that's cool.

Q: Were you back and forth between New York and Captiva [Florida]?

Thompson: Sometimes quite a lot as he got me doing more and more things, particularly when the film got going because I had to go to New York, to the film house, or to go shoot something.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the two different worlds that he had created that you were inhabiting—the New York world, the Captiva world.

Thompson: Captiva was work. It was like a beehive. Like Silicon Valley places must be, all bzz-bzz, hustle and bustle, hello, hello, people going places and doing things and times when people meet and so it was an organized day. In New York it was get up and then there'd be some stuff, we'd go by the gallery and look at this, and make sure the shipment was in, and maybe hang the work, and blah-blah-blah. But mostly then it was the evenings were always heavy-duty because around the table would sit Brice Marden, Helen Marden, Alanna Heiss before P.S.1 [New York], Marian Goodman before Marian Goodman [Gallery, New York], [Johan Wilhelm] Billy Klüver, Julie Martin, on and on and on and on. Lots of people. There were other people. There was a guy named Bob, can't think of his last name. He was a painter, he was a friend also of [William S.] Burroughs and he always tried to get Bob and Burroughs to meet.

A lot of drinking, a lot of eating sometimes. One night there was a party and by this time I was getting a little tired at some level and thought to myself I could change the art world with a hand grenade. Cynical thought, an evil thought. Not my thing, to change the art world like that. But it was that thing because everybody who was there, was there. New York was tense for Bob because he's on stage all the time, heavy performance relation, and you've got to keep it together and stretch it out over hours and have energy for six-hour stretches and ten-hour—it's really hard, hard, hard work. Fortunately he had the stamina of a mule. Drink was a problem. Indian [Native American] blood maybe, I don't know. But poisonous. But he was never dysfunctional.

There would be no day that he didn't show up. There'd never be a night when he went so far that he couldn't function the next day. He always managed. The bell rang, he was there.

Q: Did you enjoy being a part of that world?

Thompson: Oh, I had more fun than a barrel of monkeys.

Q: Yeah?

Thompson: Oh, yeah. I adored it. Because even though I was not a player, I was in the middle and observing all the things that I was interested in and I don't have to play in those ways in order to be satisfied. That's not part of my thing. I have other satisfactions. I produce fine but I don't have any grand scheme. I rubbed elbows with Amiri Baraka and his crowd, Congress of Afrikan People before they became the revolutionary whatever they were. That was fascinating. I had a good time doing that too. The Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, all those things were fun, fun, fun. Because that was genuine class struggle at the point of production and therefore, in my view, mitigated by that fact because it is a productive environment, a productive atmosphere. You're standing in New York and what we're talking about is producing culture here, not just culture in the sense as whatever human beings do, that's culture of course, but then there's culture, high culture, and there's a real difference, and some of it counts and some of it gets paid for, and people live and die for it and all that.

Looking back I can remember when the de Menils got in trouble for having that Olmec head and all that stuff. There are all kinds of strange things going on in there. I met Walter Hopps also—that was one of the names I should mention—in the sixties. I got to meet him and he was in Pasadena at the time and he was a Duchamp connection. And Ed Ruscha and Warhol and and and and.

Q: Well, you called yourself intolerant, but you also said that you loved being present. So maybe—

Thompson: In the sense that it's not my place to make other people feel bad about what they do. That's all I mean by intolerance. And that I might dare have possibly embarrassed somebody who did not deserve to be embarrassed by me of all damn people. That's all I mean by that. I lament this character trait of mine. I have no morals, but I have a moralistic streak a mile wide, it's like—no morals at all, but I'm prepared to click. New York seems to me to be stupid in some sort of way, like believing in itself so hard that you even begin to think that there's an "it" that believes in itself, that there is this dynamic and everybody's part of it somehow. I never felt part of it. I felt at home at Bob's place and around Bob. That was good enough for me because otherwise I feel homeless most of the time. But that's because there's enough going on and I can find something I can do that is sensible in there and then I don't feel like I'm taking advantage completely of the situation, yet I'm an opportunist—I'm having a golden opportunity and I'm enjoying it.

Q: When you remember that time in New York, what is some of the essence of it for you, if there is a kind of positive essence of—

Thompson: Activity, production, people knowing each other, and then the downside would be the content. The structure, the form, the mechanisms, and the devices, those kinds of things were all wonderful. New York is an engine for grinding out fascinating things, but you got to be on the make and you'd better not have any feelings.

[INTERRUPTION]

If I had an unlimited amount of money I'd live in New York because it's a city and it's a machine and I know how to use it and I have friends there. But I'm not attached to any place; I'm attached to people. I live here, my wife has got her work here, and I can work anywhere. And the anomie suits me in this town frankly. I'm glad it's not San Francisco. Where are you from, do you mind my asking?

Q: Toronto.

Thompson: Ah. Played there once. Great city.

Q: Do you remember what part of the city you were in?

Thompson: It was in a hotel, in the basement of a hotel.

Q: Okay, when was it?

Thompson: This was, we were on tour, we were right behind the Cramps, who were a week ahead of us on tour. I was in Pere Ubu at the time. This is '80 or '81.

Q: The Silver Dollar Room? Near Chinatown?

Thompson: Might have been. Had a low ceiling.

Q: Yeah, could've been. Do you remember if it was near Chinatown?

Thompson: I'm not sure.

Q: I know, lots of memories.

Thompson: Tour. Touring is not conducive to memories.

Q: Alright. Well, I think this is probably a good place to pause for today.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #2

Interviewee: Mayo Thompson

Location: Los Angeles, California

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: March 20, 2015

Q: Today is March 20, 2015. This is Sara Sinclair. It is a pleasure to be speaking with you again.

Thompson: Thank you, ma'am. I'm Mayo Thompson, it's my pleasure as well.

Q: So maybe before we jump back into this, you said that you were thinking yesterday about some of what we were speaking about, so is there anything that you want to say before we continue, any further thoughts?

Thompson: Just that obviously from yesterday's discourse you'll gather that I have fretted over the value of these kinds of things relative to the ideal and where you might actually be able to say that there are some values beyond just use value and exchange value. When I got to know him, Rauschenberg represented, to me, a man who belonged to a logical progression that I was learning about in school.

I was always looking for something and Rauschenberg came along into my life and he seemed also to be looking and he belonged to a world of people looking, a movement of people looking beyond the immediate horizon at what there is in the world. Partly to escape and partly to

discover. I would say that from what he was generous enough to confide in me about his early life, his childhood, things that he had done when he was in the Navy and stuff like that, which were charming to hear—we come from a similar background.

Class played a tremendous role in all of my thinking. It always has and I think truly it played some role in his. He was classless to some extent in the sense that he did not belong propitiously to any class, although materially he obviously was well situated and belonged to the set of power relations that counted, in respect to those kinds of pursuits, on all levels, from the highly organized to the utterly informal and private even.

Q: How do you think class played a role in shaping the way that he lived his life?

Thompson: He was born in Port Arthur [Texas] and his father worked at a refinery. He's part Indian [note: Native American, Cherokee]. He needed to get out. The war was propitious for some young men in some ways; he was eighteen and went into the Navy and wound up doing duty in a mental hospital in San Diego. He told me how when the ward would close at night, he'd take his shoes off and try to walk along the fronts of the bedsteads to the amusement of all of the patients. That's how he worked it. So he had that will.

He went to Black Mountain College from there and when we next hear of him, he's erased de Kooning and he's there because de Kooning don't let just anybody get hold of something of his. In fact he's in a position to inform de Kooning of something very serious about what is going on around here and what he belongs to. Similarly de Kooning knows this. When asked, "Do the

masters influence you?” he said, “No, I influence them.” That was the way the world saw itself. That’s the world that I thought, yeah, that’s the way I feel about it too. This is now. Not that I wish to destroy the past in any way and think that I can supersede it or transcend it in any significant sense outside of interpretation; still that’s kind of a go at doing something nobody else is doing. That was the other thing.

I identified with the idea that you need some sort of signature relationship to production, to the objects that you make. You want people to know, “Oh, that’s a Billy Bob Thornton,” or a whatever you like. A movie, you know right away what you’re dealing with. So I pick him because he’s another semi-authentic. Rauschenberg’s kind of an authentic. Me, I’m not an authentic anything and authenticity has been my bugbear since I’ve gotten into this bloody game of public half-life and objects and performance and that stuff. Because while I’m idealistic, my ideals are epistemological. I want to know the world in some kind of terms. I don’t necessarily insist on it being that way for everybody, forever.

Q: Explain the distinction you make between Rauschenberg and yourself in that sense with regard to authenticity.

Thompson: Rauschenberg is a true artist. You ask him, what are you? “I’m an artist.” Ask me what I am. I’m going to hem and haw and hedge. I’m not anything. I’m a human being and I insist on this sort of minor relationship to the grandiose. My ambitions—the other thing is, during the time that I met Rauschenberg, I had an extremely limited disposition as to what was

feasible to be doing, what was worth anybody's time. Sitting at that table in New York, I'd look at Brice Marden and I'd think—

Q: You'd think what?

Thompson: Shrugs. Hmph. Don't care.

Q: Because?

Thompson: It just seemed to me to be too, I don't know, wrapped up in stuff I don't care about frankly. I was looking for perhaps why art, how it was relevant in some sort of sense. Because it was a question of rising, as it became powerful in the seventies. Does art have a social purpose? What is it? People began talking about audience and all that sort of stuff and Rauschenberg had made the audiences that were talking to each other about being audiences and who should be an audience and appealing to this or that and blah-blah-blah. That's when all that socialist discourse entered into the whole picture because the war was over as well and people in SoHo were casting about for something meaningful to be doing with their careers. I feel for all of the people who do this kind of stuff because if I'm characteristic in any way, I would suggest that one of the realizations that goes with doing this kind of stuff is how relatively unimportant it is on the relative scale of things that are truly important. It's important to me and it makes me a better self-managing unit, able more to contribute to society in a meaningful sort of way, helps me keep my balance and all that, and a tiny bit of entertainment for somebody else. But outside of that—the generation I belong to believed that they were purveying knowledge. I learned this is not so.

Q: You said yesterday that you thought—

Thompson: And Bob also.

Q: Right, that Bob believed that art had a redemptive quality and you never felt that way.

Thompson: Never.

Q: Maybe you could speak a little bit more about both of your positions.

Thompson: What Conceptual art managed was to enforce what was at the core of any discourse in respect to these things. That is the proposition of equivalence of all of those objects irrespective of which class they belong to or what category you put them in or whatever else, meaning that there is no formal orthodoxy potential to govern any of these relations. I can recuperate a highway under a description or a byway through a photograph or what all have you. It's horses for courses and so on like that. The signature style lost its punch because imagery became universally available. It ceased to be tropic in the way that it had been. It lost its potential to tell stories outside of the initiates and all you could do was be a brand and hold your ground. That's what happened to Bob in my view. And what happened to everybody.

I went to Mr. [Lawrence G.] Gagosian's joint here. [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: Works on Metal*, Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, 2014] I was invited to see the things that Bob had made

on various precious metal surfaces, plus some sleepers hidden in there, license plates stuck on something, and saw, the guy's got it. What he had was a tremendous eye for how things fit into the world and how to dislocate them slightly so that they called attention to themselves in an aesthetic interval so that you could appreciate them in some sort of objective sense; represent them to yourself, which is what we do as spectators. I represent this thing to myself under some description. I've tried to recuperate it as best I can. Or I suspend my beliefs. Or I have no opinion about it whatever.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Urban Katydid (Glut)*, 1986  
Riveted metal parts and  
stainless steel  
24 x 138 x 38 1/2 inches (61 x  
350.5 x 97.8 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg  
Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Climb (Urban Bourbon)*, 1993  
Acrylic on stainless steel with steel and rubber  
98 x 116 x 10 inches (248.9 x 294.6 x 25.4 cm)  
Private collection

In those days when I met Bob, I was loaded with opinion. I'd met Duchamp and then I'd seen how he had taken the piss out of all of his confreres and [Francis] Picabia helped him. Picabia, a rich playboy type, just the world I propitiously belonged to; at the edges, but I belonged to it in some terrible sense. Bob was in the middle of it and he also coincided very closely with this thing I had learned from Camfield, this split between the Classic and the Romantic at some sort of level. Him, they've anointed, and less so Jasper Johns, who is more of a pure painter. That's his thing. Rauschenberg's thing is, he's like a jackdaw, whatever catches his eye, he's going to put it over there and collect it all and make something out of it later, just in case. That I also have in common, being able to come upon, and somebody says, "I've got a problem," and I can say, "Well, what have we got?" I can solve problems and I can improvise like hell. That's one of my talents. Bob liked that and he encouraged it and he found uses for it, and he was prepared to sustain the differences there were between us on the basis of a brotherly relationship.

Q: Do you remember any specific times that he encouraged that improvisation?

Thompson: In me? He gave me jobs. I got the film job [*Mostly About Rauschenberg*]. Mr. [Jacques] Clemente had delivered some film to Bob to approve. Mr. Clemente was on his last legs and Bob looked at the film and we were all standing there, Christine and I were standing there, and he said, "I can't let this go out." He turned to Christine and said, "Do you know anybody that can make movies?" She said, "He can," and pointed at me. And he said, "You can?" And I said, "I have. Yeah, I can."

Q: What had you done previously?

Thompson: A short film when I was in college. And I'm not afraid of anything. No process terrifies me. I wouldn't want to build or try to defuse a nuclear weapon or anything like that. I'm talking about in the realm of this kind of improvisational stuff. There is no mystery involved in what was going on in film. I was confident. What did we have in mind, what should we do? Let's think about this and so on like that. So I came up with the idea that we would make a film together about his stuff and we would cannibalize, to the extent that we could, what was already there.

It was difficult for Bob to do that job. Bob, being an artist, and seeing and understanding what it means to be that. He played the role very well; he understood what his responsibilities were—

Q: What did he think his responsibilities were?

Thompson: If called upon to deliver the goods, deliver the goods. Part of that is playing the role and keeping the thing going, keeping the life moving, keeping it alive somehow, and meaningful. If people find it meaningful, well, let's play then.

Q: And he believed it was meaningful.

Thompson: I think he found it deeply meaningful. He really believed in magic. Powerfully. I sat next to him when Muhammad Ali knocked George [Edward] Foreman out in the eighth [October

30, 1974, The Rumble in the Jungle] and he showed me he had a silver spike in his hand that he always held when he was wishing for something. He said, “I knew it!”

Q: Did you ever have discussions about how your views diverged? His belief in the redemptive power of art and your—

Thompson: No. No. There was no point in discussing it. It was part of the challenge perhaps, if anything. I don't think he resented the fact that I had been educated. He found it—he'd also himself been to college. He went to Black Mountain College; he probably got a diploma. I never finished anything. Mrs. de Menil—I did not become part of that world really.

But I would make a tape or something like that. I made a tape, an audiotape, on a piece that I made on his Jungle Road. You've been to Captiva. Well there's the Beach House and then there are the print shops and then there's a road that goes through this that we call the Jungle Road. I mapped that road with a compass so that I would walk in as far as I could in a single direction and as soon as I had to change direction, I would make a compass calculation and I would write it down, so on like that, bit-by-bit I mapped this road. Then I got a tape recorder and I went from point to point to point to point and recorded this whole thing and had Bob listen to it. The deeper you get in, the mosquitoes start to appear. I would stop at the points and just let it settle for some seconds and then the mosquitoes would come and it'd get deeper. Bob said it's like a silent horror movie. So he appreciated—which was very nice—that he would give the time to do that sort of thing.

He trusted me to do the film, he trusted Christine and I to edit the film and make a film. When I had ideas about what might be interesting to do, for example to go to collectors' houses and film the paintings—film works in situ—I got to do that. I filmed [Leo and Antoinette “Toiny”] Castelli's apartment on Fifth Avenue and a parade went by. It was fantastic. Fortuitous things. Of course you realize, making film, that this happens naturally, but I can't prove that it actually happened. It looks like I dreamed the whole thing up and it's some joke, something cinematic, it's not an accident. That ambivalence in there—that's why I like film and that's why I like those media. That's what's interesting about them.

Q: Let's just slow down a tiny bit. Let's start with the beginning of the trip to Israel.

Thompson: The beginning of the trip to Israel?

Q: Yeah.

Thompson: All right. We were in Naples. Bob had a show at Lucio Amelio [note: *Robert Rauschenberg*, Modern Art Agency, Naples, 1974] and Ileana had hooked us up. There was a collector in New York, I don't recall his name, he lived up Lafayette Street by the post office up there. He and his wife [Samuel and Adeline Dorsky] had some connections in Jerusalem and they put up money for Bob to go over there and make something on site, and for the thing to be bought and contributed to the museum. So Bob Petersen, Hisachika, Christine, and I went with him.

We went first to Italy, where Bob had gone for work with Lucio, and stopped in Naples. It was Bob's birthday. I've told this story before about how Cy was going to have—that Bob's birthday was going to be special. It was decided that Bob would have to ride a boat across Naples bay, one of those little "vroom," in the night after the opening at Lucio's, and then walk up some steps. [Note: The exhibition opened in May 1974. Rauschenberg's birthday is October 22.] The man who owned the villa was a dentist who had bought all of the works out of the show at Lucio's and was having a party for him on his birthday, la-la-la and blah-blah-blah. When we arrived, we were going across there, and it's a balmy evening, even though it's like November, right, and somehow not cold. Bob dressed in a white suit, red shirt, brown shoes. He didn't want to go alone. Christine and I, of course, we were always game, so we went with him. We rode across there and we're riding and coming up over the thing and you see these little flickering lights all the way up the staircase. Then you get closer and closer and realize that Cy has situated little boys in putti costumes, short little skirts and toga kind of things, laurel wreaths, and they're holding fasces, which are burning candles, and so on. They're stationed. It's like Tiberius is arriving to spend the night before sailing off to Capri the next day. Bob's laughing about Cy, and it's a rueful sort of laugh, but he knows that this is part of his responsibility, to live through this damn thing. He gets to the top of the stairs and 150 people cheer him on. He absorbs it. He can take it. He knows his responsibilities as a great artist. He'd worked hard to get there.

So then we go to Rome, I think, on a fast train or something like that, get to da Vinci [Fiumicino–Leonardo da Vinci International Airport] and Hi sachika gets searched like nobody's business by the Israeli security, by El Al security. It was out there in the middle. Off between the spaces in the tarmac is the shell, the hulk of this Pan Am plane that some Japanese anti-war

students had blown up not so long before that. So everybody's real careful and real sensitive. I had never been searched like that either. We all got searched thoroughly, even though our papers were a hundred percent bona fide, and Bob knew all these people, knew Jacob Javits, Ileana Sonnabend is surely known in Israel, I should have thought.

We eventually did arrive there—went to Jerusalem. They put us in some sort of, I don't know what it was, kind of like a hotel and kind of like a conference center area. Everybody had nice rooms. Food—no disrespect to the Israelis, but the kosher food was inedible. There was a steak they gave me the first night, I could still be eating that steak today. [Laughs] Tough. The best food in Jerusalem is Arab food. We went often to Arab quarters and the Palestinians were quiet at this time.



Mayo Thompson, unidentified man, Christine Kozlov, Rauschenberg, and unidentified woman in Jerusalem's Old City, Israel, 1974

We sat there and Bob was going to make the work in situ. We had worked with him on the *Early Egyptian* series so we knew something about how these procedures work, some of the moves and things that could be done. So we were prepared. They organized a vehicle for us, which was an

irony, a Volkswagen microbus with a bit of a pickup truck bed in the back. Green. I drove a lot and we drove around the Holy Land, as they call it, and Israel, and went to Jericho, where Hisachika was a big hit because they all loved Bruce Lee and they loved kung fu movies. The Arab kids would throng around him and he would entertain them. [Laughs] Every place you went into, there'd be a little glass showcase kind of thing where, images of the heroes had been pinned up. There was always [Gamal Abdel] Nasser [Hussein] of course and [Joseph] Stalin, who was popular still with that crowd out there, and this one and that one. It was calm.



Robert Petersen, Hisachika Takahashi, Mayo Thompson, and Rauschenberg getting into the rental pickup truck they used to travel around Israel for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition, 1974. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

We went to Jericho, we went to Bethlehem. We drove through the Shatila [refugee] camp one time when we had some official with us, somebody from the museum, maybe Yona Fischer or somebody like that. We were driving one time and we drove in through there and you could see people peering out. This was before the Intifada or any of those ideas had ever been—maybe they were ideas, but they hadn't happened. It was a little unnerving later to read about what happened with Ariel Sharon and that place and his zealots.

Bethlehem was a strange thing. One is watching all of this stuff and there was a French film crew and we crossed paths with them. Bob traded shoes with them at one point. There's a photograph, you see Bob putting on these white patent-leather shoes; he traded them with one of these French film crew people. We dined in the same restaurant one afternoon. So we had a leisurely bit and we drove around and collected junk, like scraps from the Seven-Day War and some sand and a long length of hose and an old wheelbarrow and a big stick, a bunch of junk.



Rauschenberg trying on white patent-leather shoes, with Hisachika Takahashi and others, Israel, 1974. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: How many days were you out there doing that, do you think?

Thompson: I can't recall how long we were there. Seemed like we were there for a week to two weeks, something like that. It was organized that Bob Petersen should have an exhibition too and there was a contemporary gallery in Jerusalem where he hung some stuff up and had a show [*Robert Petersen*, Sara Gilat Gallery, Jerusalem, 1974]. Shimon Peres showed up with a

bodyguard, the hardest-looking dude I ever saw. Snake eyes. Very impressive, very impressive. We met Teddy Kollek, we were invited around to Abba Eban's house and sat there and Abba was busy that day so we sat with Madame Eban and had tea in the library.

Q: Do you remember what you talked about?

Thompson: Niceties. Bob remembered the night that the Ebans had been over to the house, to the studio on Lafayette Street up on the top floor, on the kitchen floor having dinner. Abba had been obliged to excuse himself and get back to the UN [United Nations], and he said, "I think peace is breaking out." Stuff like that. How have you been? I'm fine. How's so-and-so? Oh, they're fine, haven't seen them in ages, blah-blah-blah. The noblesse talks too well to each other.

Another time we were invited out to Beersheba [Israel] to meet a Bedouin, a sheik, and we sat in his tent. I have a recording of him playing this one-stringed instrument, fantastic, and then he and his mates sitting there and laughing. They gave us this very nice mint tea. We all sat around insulting them, showing the bottoms of our feet, not knowing anything. Then his son, in whose charge we were, took us to his house because the Israelis were encouraging the Bedouins to "settle down." [Laughs] So they built a house and here we sit in this house and we see how the pictures are hanging and they give us a meal. No women present except for Christine. He sets in the middle chicken, lamb, a bed of rice, and you eat with one hand, and it's the caca hand you don't eat with and the whole deal, it's really a serious thing. These are the Bedouins. They're tribal people. It's a special kind of thing they have going down there so you don't know what you're in the middle of. It looks funny, Beersheba looks like towns I've been to in Western

Europe except the palm trees are there instead of the usual foliage. What we now understand as Postmodern kind of stuff.

Bob was always looking and collecting things and picking stuff up that he needed. Then we get back to the museum and we install ourselves in there and start making stuff. I had shipped a crate of art supplies from New York and had to go get that in Tel Aviv, and customs was giving them a hard time about letting it in. They were obviously working it for political reasons—one department against another department and on and on; Bob was hostage to these relations even though he was a feted cultural guest. He still had trouble with bureaucratic red tape. Finally we get the crate, put it in the truck, take it back over to the museum, and start making the stuff. Have you seen that book? The photos? [Note: referring to the exhibition catalogue *Rauschenberg in Israel*, 1975.]

Q: Yeah, we have some of it here.

Thompson: I have a copy somewhere in my mother's possessions. She had a copy of it.

Q: Here are some of the photos.

Thompson: Yeah. This is all found stuff. Collected all those sticks. This is Yona Fischer. This is the lady who owned the gallery that Bob Petersen showed in. That's Christine. That's just somewhere. I think that's perhaps the time when we saw— This is near Galilee, the Sea of Galilee. We went up there one day. Another time went to the Dead Sea. Saw a lot of really

amazing stuff. I was a hardcore atheist by this time already anyway and extremely disrespectful. We went into the church where Jesus is said to have been born and these Greeks could read right off that I didn't really give a damn. Me being a nasty little bastard, I insisted on showing them. You can see. This looks like [Lawrence] Larry Weiner, but it's not. This is a guy—we went one day to the art school and Bob spoke to the students and kindly looked at things and went around and talked about stuff. That's the thing, the confidence they shared because he too was a visual artist.



Robert Petersen, Rauschenberg, and Hisachika Takahashi working on *Untitled* (1974) from the *Made in Israel* series (1974), created for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1974. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



Rauschenberg, Robert Petersen, and students at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, Israel, 1974. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: What was Bob like with the students?

Thompson: Generous, even-handed—just like he treated me. He was a real democrat, absolutely. Absolutely. That’s one of the things that I learned from him. Tolerance, democracy. [Michael] Mike Kelley and I had some interesting conversations, when I got to know Mike and came out here and started to work, and Mike was very helpful to me. He said, “I’m no democrat myself,” but he said, “I think that we’re going to have to have universal democracy before anything interesting will ever happen again.” We had previously had a conversation where I said I think in our generation we destroyed everything. We did our best; I mean, I did my best, I’ll put it like that: I did my best in the endgame because it seemed like the logical strategy. When I had been presented a set of historical possibilities in the form of avant-garde movements, it actually did go somewhere. Art actually did seem to follow these things. You could see that there were effects of these kinds of little findings on the general image-making and the things that people began to be responsive to and the kinds of iconography, the attitudes to it. So you could really say something for it in terms of how that progressed.

Then there came a moment where the propositional equivalence became obvious and it was no longer possible to sustain the hierarchies that were necessary to keep these symbols—to keep the values of the symbols secure. It had to be fought for in some slightly different terms and increasingly different terms, which are tending down, down, down, down, down toward this democracy away from this exclusionist model, this extremely refined exclusionist model, toward this inclusionist model, which is where I am. I think I say, by now either all music is valid or none of it is. All music is alternative. If there’s music, it’s all alternative. I think that I learned

that from Rauschenberg. I think that he and I would have something to talk about with each other now. The only argument we might have would be about goodness.

Q: And would he be interested in having that kind of conversation?

Thompson: Would I?

Q: Would he?

Thompson: Maybe. I wouldn't rule him out on any conversation. He was a curious man. A good people reader, but not the kind of person who would force something perhaps. Well, he'd force a little bit. I won't say he wouldn't force anything, but he was always kind of gentle, poking and probing and that kind of stuff, about this and that. He was never really harsh.

Q: Okay and you said the point of disagreement might be around goodness because he believed there was more.

Thompson: Yeah, he believed. I would accept that there's virtue, but goodness, I don't want to hear about it. I don't know how. I've read [George Edward] G. E. Moore. Bertrand Russell argued about this question and wrestled with it and I read a lot about moral philosophy. I read a lot—the one thing I have read is philosophy, over the years. That's one of the reasons why I liked Conceptual art and why I was drawn to Conceptual art, because it was back to the basics about what dialectic is and what cognition is and what mental representation is, and what

language comes to and where it comes from and what it represents, and so on and so on and so on. When people start telling me they can do this and that in art and nobody else can do that, I laugh. Because they're cutting off their nose to spite their face. The whole game in art is to find out who can share what with whom. I learned that from Bob.

Q: And where do you think his belief in goodness came from?

Thompson: The spirit world, which he was attuned to. I'm not denying that there are feelings, strong, powerful forces out there. I've played music and you get in a room and you get five hundred people to start feeling something, there's something genuine happening in there. It may be transitional, transitive, pfft, gone like the morning dew, but it's real. It happens in live theater—the magic of theater. I think Rauschenberg liked theater very much and you've seen him, he's not afraid to get up and act it out. That we have in common.

The value thing. It would be a philosophical question because I think—I don't believe in—I was raised Catholic. My mother reared me Catholic. I went to the Catholic schools. Then when I was eighteen, when I didn't have to no more, I didn't. The other part of my family are Baptists and my father was a Presbyterian and born-again Christian, and so on like that. The blandishment has always been in those directions and while I respect religion and people's religiosity, people's need for whatever, that's their business. I'm not like [Mikhail Sergeyevich] Gorbachev's famous remark: I'm an atheist, but I'm not a practicing atheist. Just, I don't believe.

But I know that there are forces and I know that there are psychic forces and cosmic forces. I know that Bob was tuned in to those kinds of things. I think the difference—I would put it this way: he belonged to a philosophical world in which it was possible still to work—that worked from totality, from a notion of totality or holism, where everything fits together; there are no contradictory bits. Which is why people get tormented. They can't compartmentalize; you've got to be all sewn together neatly. That's why I think Bob liquefied his relationships to a lot of those things because the only way to deal with that stuff and overcome the voice that tells you that this is nonsense as well as wonderful—that voice has to be stopped sometimes. The thing I never understood was the deep commitment to the drink.

Q: Well, I just think it's a disease.

Thompson: I know. I know that. But why not do something about it?

Q: Yeah. I don't disagree. We could have a whole other conversation about that.

Thompson: Yeah, well, I come from a family of wrestlers and boxers and drinkers and fighters and one thing and another on my mother's side—a bunch of roughhousers. On my daddy's side, also some weird stuff going on over there as well. I think my grandfather was in show business.

Q: You were saying that you thought that he liquidated his relationship to—do you remember what you were saying?

Thompson: Liquefied, I said.

Q: Liquefied? Oh, okay. So that's where you were going.

Thompson: I don't think he liquidated his relationship to anything. I think he sustained—it was a running joke in Israel; you could only get Green Label not Black Label Jack [Daniel's whiskey].

Q: Do you think he was conscious of his own alcoholism?

Thompson: I think he knew exactly what he was doing and that he was like a finely tuned prizefighter, like an athlete who has given himself up and been trained, who gives himself up to his career and is living out something extremely important to him, and that he sees as meaningful and important to others, and he sees how it is and why it is, and he accepts the role unquestioningly. It's this messianic impulse. I don't know what it is. It makes me nervous. It made him nervous too. I suspect that's why he hedged the feelings that went with it—the awesome aspect of it, the sublimity of it rather than beauty, and preferred to be able to focus on the beauty. Which is understandable. There's only so much you can take of being the center of attention, the most wonderful person on earth, get patted on the back, and everybody's saying "Yes, Bob; yes, Bob; yes, Bob," all day long, no matter what you say.

That's why he liked Christine because he knew what she had done, what she was doing. He knew about Conceptual art, it was happening already by then. So he would ask her, because if she'd have said "Tsk," he would go, "Hmm." He'd have thought about it. You compare that to

Warhol, who's going around saying, "Anybody got an idea?" My kind of guy, right? And I couldn't go around Warhol because I had my taste full of freaks—don't want to hang out with more freaks already. I don't even want to hang out with him. I knew people who were around him and all that kind of stuff and I never aspired to that world because it looked to me— I knew it would be really pointless to be—I would really not belong. Rauschenberg was more ambiguous. I could sustain it with some self-respect. Because I'm not a fan of anything. That's how Mike and I got along. Finally I got to meet Mike and he said, "Mayo, I'm not a fan." I went, "Oh. Okay. Cool, we can talk. Wonderful."

Q: Okay. Well let's go back to—you're in Israel driving around—

Thompson: Yeah, maybe I was a fan of Rauschenberg's work and then as I got to know him I really appreciated him, but I did not feel inferior to him in any sense. He did not seek to make me that or to put me in that kind of position. So it was all quite normal. It was distribution of labor and also distribution of functions so the various kinds of working things— Bob is slowly looking around and he's got criteria: he's got the space, he sees the space, he knows how many pieces he wants to put in it, he knows what his responsibilities are to make something, and he makes something for the art school, and he makes something for this and he makes something for that, and he satisfies everybody because it's all part of the game. And Ileana is the puppet mistress of all of these relations and she's hooking everybody up and dealing with all the other kind of stuff. Leo's also part of it, but he's not so directly involved, not the way Ileana was, at least not to my eye he wasn't.

Q: How not?

Thompson: Ileana was really present and one didn't see much of Leo unless one was in New York and there was an opening. Leo and Ileana, they must have had a magic relationship, which sustained even beyond the end of their marriage. They were both extremely civilized Old World people. She's a Romanian princess. It matters. [Laughs]

Q: Do you remember how other people were responding to the work in Israel?

Thompson: I don't know. Never heard a mumbling word against it. The adequacy of it was the thing that always astounded me. He always managed it. There was never a bad piece. There was never something you'd think, "Oh, minus that, cool." All of it somehow fit. So he had a sense of space and how to use space, like what it was to walk into it and the series of effects and what happens when you turn around and all of that stuff. He'd absorbed all of the lessons and he'd been to a million shows and seen how other people had done it. He deeply absorbed. He was an expert in his domain.

Another conversation I had with Mike, he said, "It's weird. In art I'm the master of my domain and my materials—" he said, "—but of course I'm an idiot who never knows a thing about what I do," and he didn't mean it in a pejorative sense; he just means someone comes in and goes "Huh?" and does something I never thought of. I said, "Yeah, but it's still your work." And that's the thing that Bob knew. And then Warhol. Whoever claims to have made those paintings,

they're Warhols. There was a Warhol recipe, Warhol formula. The thing is, I couldn't make a fake Rauschenberg. I don't think there's any way.

Q: Okay. So let's talk about the film now. Tell me, I know you've told this story elsewhere, but just in brief, how you came to be on board.

Thompson: On the film?

Q: —on the film, yes.

Thompson: Bob saw what Mr. Clemente had done and would not accept it. Because he saw what he had done is really the point and he had really let it hang out at a very personal level in this thing. I'm going to say this stuff because I believe it needs to be said and no aspersion on Bob. Bob, in order to be able to deal with him, he obviously went farther than he should have and then he really was— I remember, "I was not going to be called Milton anymore." Basta. And that was in the film. That was how he got to be Bob. He didn't want to talk about that because he didn't want his work explained in terms of that. He was very intelligent about how you stand to your own work and how you're prepared to be seen.

Q: Okay, before you continue I want to ask you about that, because that's something that's really come up in a lot of the interviews. Why do you think that was so important to him, to not explain?

Thompson: Ileana warned him not to.

Q: Oh, okay. Because?

Thompson: The mystery is more fun. It'll take care of itself. If the gross abstractions are in place, the fine-grained details will take care of themselves. He's a functionalist; he understands function very well. The magic works on him. He's responding to a magic he feels. It's seamless. It doesn't need explanation. That's what art consists of, is this possibility, which under other premises is not possible.

Q: Okay. Art.

Thompson: I think that Bob's relationship to his own works was that those are alienated things; they have a life of their own and he knew that.

Q: But that's just for himself. That's not the same thing as what he's producing for other people.

Thompson: Right, right. And that part of it can't be revealed anyway. How could you share that? You might find a way, but it's not something you might systematically set about and it's also not part of the work. It's not part of the responsibility.

Q: So the film—the Clemente film was too much of a biography? It was too revelatory?

Thompson: It was too straight. Too boring. Too flat.

Q: And you saw what had been created so far?

Thompson: I saw it. Pelicans arrive over the water, land, music, on and on. Cut to boring. It really was not good. No disrespect to the guy. He was making it for Reiner [E.] Moritz and Michèle Arnaud, who was a pop singer in France, fascinating woman. One time I was in Henry Miller house [Henry Miller Memorial Library] up in Big Sur [California]; I was just passing by there and there's Henry Miller and I thought, okay, once in my life I'm going to go in there. Went in and there was a Michèle Arnaud double album and I tried to buy it and they wouldn't sell it to me. But she had a film company, Reiner Moritz had a film company, and they had financed this thing and Bob had final approval. Bob had final say, which was artist's approval. This was something that was institutionalized in the sixties. We found it in music as well. The artist can withhold approval of the thing and it will not go forth until the artist approves of it. Bob wasn't lawyered up, but he surely had sound legal advice on these things when it came to collecting and how you deal with people, and what you let people have and use. Warhol never got releases for any of those films; that's why they still have problems with all that stuff.

He just said, "No." So then there was the idea, "What are we going to do instead?" So we went and filmed some new thing. Bob wrote some aphorisms. Bob was a terrific aphorist. He sat down at his kitchen table with a pot of white tulips there, with his papers in front of him, and looked up into the camera, and I went and rented a very, very good Arriflex 16. You ever seen an Arriflex 16-millimeter camera, proper thing, 400-foot magazine? We shot this film. I shot him just like he

was a newscaster. Behind him is the stove and here's the table and the flowers and so on. His sleeves are rolled up and he's a little tan. He was always very conscious in Florida to be sure to get tan because that's the one thing they ain't got in New York, is tan. And then he read these aphorisms, one after another.

So then we got the film and then Christine and I went to Paris and sat there for—I can't remember quite how long, maybe a month. Parked in a hotel on the Rue de Seine, which I had known from Paris before, in the sixties, and edited together a new version of the film using what we could of the old film. Some film we had shot while we were in Paris, which were some shots out of the Abrams book [Andrew Forge, *Rauschenberg*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969] of paintings, of Combine paintings and works of art, of the goat [*Monogram*, 1955–59]. All the greatest hits. And then we cut it together in a sort of way using these aphorisms as the anchor and in between chunks of stuff. And Ileana was watching over this whole thing and then we showed it to them and they went, okay.

Q: How often would she be checking in with you guys?

Thompson: Never. They just said, "Have you got it?" We got it.

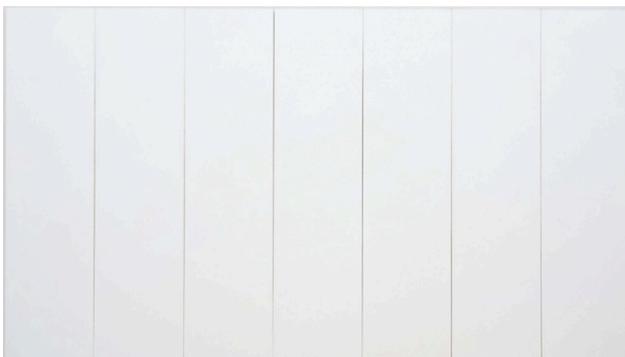
Q: Okay. Well tell me a little bit more about the shooting. You said you did some shooting in Israel, some shooting in Paris.

Thompson: We didn't shoot any film in Paris, only still films. No movie.

Q: Anything else? Anywhere else? You started to tell me yesterday that you shot at some collectors' houses—

Thompson: Oh yes, I did. I shot at Leo's house. I shot at the guy's who invented the bobby pin maybe, who had a place up on the East River. Oh fantastic, like up on the twentieth floor; you look out over the East River—camera comes in, camera goes across like this, and you're looking. Here's a white Jasper Johns over the end table, here now a king-size bed and a huge white Picasso, and the camera then panning over here, and over the other end table a white Rauschenberg.

Just natural sounds, was the other thing we committed to. There would be no music other than music that Bob had made and produced. He cut together some tapes back in the days when he was working with Johns. It's well known that *4'33"* [John Cage, 1952] is a response to Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* [1951]. So I filmed there. I filmed in Dallas.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*White Painting* [seven panel], 1951  
Oil on canvas  
72 x 125 x 1 1/2 inches (182.9 x 317.5 x 3.8 cm)  
overall  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: What was in Dallas?

Thompson: *Oracle* [1962–65], the metal pieces with the radio cinders in them. [Note: Exhibited in *Poets of the Cities: New York and San Francisco 1950–1965*, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1974]. There's where the interface of science, his interface with Billy Klüver, is absolutely hundred percent justified. And Billy was a lovely man, sweet as he could possibly be. And it's not Amy Sullivan [phonetic], but her sister Julie, I got the names mixed up—I know both of them. Julie is—have you talked to Julie?



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Oracle*, 1962–65

Five-part found-metal assemblage with five concealed radios: ventilation duct; automobile door on typewriter table, with crushed metal; ventilation duct in washtub and water, with wire basket; constructed staircase control unit housing batteries and electronic components; and wooden window frame with ventilation duct

Dimensions variable

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Pierre Schlumberger, 1976  
Engineers: Billy Klüver, Harold Hodges, Per Biorn, Toby Fitch, and Robert K. Moore

Q: Julie Martin? Yes.

Thompson: Cool. It's too bad Trisha Brown can't talk anymore. [James] Jim Rosenquist? They were at Tampa [Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Institute for Research in Art] together and he knows something about the print shop that might be interesting anecdotally. I don't know. Sorry, I got sidetracked.

Q: You were talking about *Oracle*.

Thompson: Yeah, we filmed *Oracle* over there and *Erased de Kooning* is there and I think there may be more than one of them. Wouldn't surprise me at all if Mr. de Kooning gave him another one and said, "Can you do that again, please?"

Q: I also read that you shot at a restorer's in Philadelphia?

Thompson: Yes I did. I had to go to a restorer where *Rebus* [1955] was in a room. It was enormous. [Kathryn] Kathy Bigelow, who was a friend, and I went down there to Philly. We stopped renting a camera because Bob had a camera, which he had won in Venice, an Arriflex. We bought a 400-foot magazine for it and got a tripod and a cell sync motor and the whole thing so we could really run it properly and took this camera and drove to Philly and set up in this room and filmed *Rebus*. That kind of stuff was allowed and plus I had this historical footage, I had some footage from Channel 13, a performance that Rauschenberg had put together which had Alex Hay and Debbie Hay and Steve Paxton in it [*Linoleum*, 1966]. I had *Canoe* [1966], a film he had made, all the historical film that he had made, we had pieces of it at least, and those things are slugged into the film, sometimes all of it. All of *Canoe* is there.



Robert Rauschenberg

*Rebus*, 1955

Combine: oil, synthetic polymer paint, pencil, crayon, pastel, cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers, including a drawing by Cy Twombly, and fabric on canvas mounted and stapled to fabric

Three panels: 96 x 131 1/8 x 1 3/4 inches (243.8 x 333.1 x 4.4 cm) overall

The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Partial and promised gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder and purchase

There's one beautiful dance piece [*Pelican*, 1963] that he did with, he and Alex on roller skates with these huge parachutes on their backs, and what's the lady, the ballerina's name? I can't think of Madame's name.

Q: Carolyn Brown?

Thompson: I can't think of who it is exactly, but anyway, it is a gorgeous piece of film. He had some music that Bob had recorded, where he'd just run the tuner on the radio and we matched up—that's the one piece of artifice in the film. It's one of two pieces which involve music, but it's Rauschenberg's music that we used to illustrate this one section in this moment where it breaks into [Claude-Achille] Debussy and she [Carolyn Brown] leans back and it's—to die for.



Robert Rauschenberg, Carolyn Brown, and Alex Hay performing *Pelican* (1963), First New York Theater Rally, former CBS studio, Broadway and Eight-first Street, New York, May 1965. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Loewenstein Novick

Q: Did he come with you on these trips to film these pieces?

Thompson: No.

Q: So then after all this, you go back to Paris, you spend a month—

Thompson: Yes, and by the way, on the way home from Dallas we stopped in Opelousas [Louisiana] and visited his family, visited his mama and his sister [in Lafayette, Louisiana] and picked up some frozen crawfish [laughs] and some gumbo from Daddy's and headed on back.

Q: When was that?

Thompson: God almighty, I can't remember what year it was. That must have been '74.

Q: Okay, so Janet [Begneaud, Rauschenberg's sister] would've already been married to Byron [Begneaud].

Thompson: Byron's hand was wrapped up when I met him too. I don't know why. Maybe he'd hurt himself—

Q: Hunting?

Thompson: He's a sportsman, Louisiana boy.

Then we rented a Steenbeck, which was delivered from Miami because it's got a burgeoning film industry. So we set it up in the basement of the Beach House. Christine and I sat in there and by that time I had all the film accumulated from New York that we had shot. We made a work print and edited together a film, a filmed version of it. We filmed a lot in Florida as well and we filmed a section at the print shop of him making a *Hoarfrost* [1974–76] and then the last sequence is this parade, this wash of *Hoarfrost*, like a hundred of them hanging in the studio. Not a hundred, maybe fifty, and some huge ones, in that studio behind the Beach House, which is where we lived.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Cactus Custard (Hoarfrost)*, 1975  
Solvent transfer on fabric with cardboard and fabric  
collage  
75 1/2 x 49 inches (191.8 x 124.5 cm)  
Private collection

Q: Was he around? Was he in Captiva at that time?

Thompson: Yes, yes, yes. The thing was, it was called *Mostly About Rauschenberg*. The reason—we all took equal credit for it, the three of us. The idea was that we made this film together with him. Ileana said it was my version, my understanding of him, but people say things; one should always bear in mind in the art world, they're saying it because they have to. And there's somebody standing there who needs to hear that in that way.

Q: And why would she have needed to say that?

Thompson: Who knows? Because Mrs. [Nicoletta] Clemente was there?

Q: Okay.

Thompson: She came to the showing of it in the Lido in Venice.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: And she was very anxious and we put a slug in the beginning that said this film wouldn't have been made without him.

Q: Right, sure.

Thompson: We tried to be very correct where she was concerned. She didn't complain because it was not her husband's film.

Q: Right. So tell me about that time in Captiva, while you were working on the film and the role that all three of you played.

Thompson: I trusted Christine to understand. She had taste and she had an eye and she knew this guy. He trusted her on the same grounds. He and I knew each other some, and he knew me as a man who's capable of doing film, writing something. So we just started piecing together the film and talking about the sections. We really didn't have to talk much, it just put itself together.

Because we all understood that Bob wanted to minimize his presence in the film. He wanted the film to be about his work, about his ideas, and not about him so much.

When it was over, I saw him sometime, they [MHF Productions and RM Productions] rejected the film and wanted to put it back in production, and somebody else made another version of it, and I talked to the film house and the guy said, “I like your version, but we’re making another version. No, they decided they can’t put this out, we’re going to make another version.” I talked to Bob sometime after and he said, “Yeah,” he said, “goddamn it.” He says, “If they ask me to stand on my head and spit nickels this time, I’m doing it. I’m finished with that goddamn thing.” That kind of stuff.

Q: How were you thinking about the process of making the film? Did you have a specific intention? Was there intention to honor his hope? Was your intention to try to apply some other kind of conceptual thinking to the— Was it just simply intuitive?

Thompson: Purely intuitive. Strictly intuitive. I can do anything and will. And if you don’t like it, I’ll adjust it.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: You know, music, hearing Mozart, how much of that would you like? What color? How many yards? I work on demand with him. My art relation is not so revelatory, it’s just not full-blown. Maybe I’ll have tremendous success in New York in October, who knows? [Laughs] I could get used to that.

Q: Sure. Did you like the final film that you produced?

Thompson: Yeah. I mean, I see its weaknesses. It is a filmic object more than it is a documentary. Much more could have been done on it to make it much more legible, to make it convey more information.

Q: What would you have done?

Thompson: Title the paintings. I'd have added lots of subtitles. We only added a few. We had a very limited—it never occurred to us just to start shooting all of the titles. All the paintings should have had a title and it should have said what the name of the painting was when it was done. But all we had were captions for the films, so we didn't have captions for everything, and it was not self-explanatory. It didn't say, "Captiva, Florida," and stuff like that. Suddenly you were somewhere else. [Laughs] Like somebody's house: Whose house is this? What am I doing here? I'm looking at this work. I hear the maid in the kitchen talking to Leo's son, I hope they don't catch me before I sneak out. It's got that kind of feeling to it. [Laughs]

Leo's apartment is fantastic. He and Toiny had a lovely apartment filled with every work of art by every artist you knew. And some you didn't know and felt that you might well profit from learning who they might be.

Q: Who were the first people that saw the film?

Thompson: Ileana and Antonio [Homem] of course. I failed to mention Antonio yesterday and I don't know how he slipped my mind. He's one of the sweetest men I have ever met in my life, an absolutely stone player. Plays the game beautifully. Very elegant fellow.

Q: What did Ileana think of the film?

Thompson: Bob liked it, that was enough for her.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: It was a question of—I don't know what happened. I don't think that she said to them, "You should do something more." Or if she said, "What do you think?" And they said, "Eh." Somehow it didn't happen. She did say she thought it was my version, my understanding. One time I showed her some work. I had a studio visit with Ileana. I, too, tried my hand. I was making sound pieces and doing some drawings that went with them and she said, "Mayo, I think that film is your thing." Thank you, ma'am. Picked up my stuff and went. She was quite right, for the kind of stuff that I was thinking about in those days.

Now I'm drawing again and doing other kinds—I'm going to do whatever I feel like. Now I understand something about it that I did not understand in those days and so I think I can play the game. We'll see. But we showed the film in the Lido, in a cinema in Venice. Nobody there, practically. Just us. The party—the reception was okay. People seemed to like it fine. And then next, I never thought about it, we just made it, just did it and next.

Q: Right, okay. Well, now that you think about it—

Thompson: I think it's interesting because Bob and Christine and I made it together, and it's a collaboration between the three of us. Bob felt the responsibility to make a movie and he didn't like the standard form—the form that appears to tell you everything that you ever wanted to know and needed to know about this person, basta, it's over. That's the part I imagine he didn't really like, was because it kind of puts a bow on it and that's the end of it. It's also Christine's chops as a Conceptual artist, as one of the first people to do that stuff on her own terms, and me as an outsider of everybody's game, who fancies you can do anything. So it is these three things, streams. And those are three legitimate streams in American culture, I do absolutely believe. It's the old school and the new arrivistes and the people who are caught in the middle, who know how to do stuff, but who don't know quite what to do. Who've already done stuff that nobody seems to give a damn about. And I'd never mentioned it.

When we fell out with Rauschenberg, I was sitting with Kathy Bigelow, and she and Jeffrey Lew were together, and I went and sat with them. Christine and I were getting ready to do something, we were going to leave town maybe, I don't know exactly what it was, but Jeffrey Lew started chewing me out, because he loved Bob and he felt that I had insulted him with my left wing attitudes. He said, "That Red Krayola, you think that you're so smart." I said, "You know about that?" I was shocked. I didn't think anybody knew anything, didn't think anybody cared. I didn't offer it. I didn't go, "Hey, I made this!" I never thought too much frankly about the half-life of the thing. I never thought—I just thought, it's fifty-three minutes long because it was going to be

on educational TV and that's what the format asked for. Okay. Two sections, twenty-six and a half, twenty-six and a half.

Q: Tell me more about the encounters that you had with Bob after you had done the film.

Because yesterday you told me about that one—

Thompson: We started to fall out. The deeper I got into it with Art & Language—there was a moment when I asked Bob— He had this foundation and I told Bob that I wanted to make this record, that I started to work with Art & Language, and I had just gotten to meet them in '73. A couple of the English ones were in New York for a conference with ones in New York and I got chatting with these English guys, we got talking about music. Nobody had ever asked me about my music and suddenly people were asking me about it. So I played for them, gave them a record, showed them my record, they listened to it, and I talked to them later and said, “What do you think?” Kind of personal. I said, “Yeah, it's a solo record, what do you expect? You got another idea about lyrics?” Well yeah, sure. I said, “Oh yeah, really? Send me something and I'll put it to music.” Sure enough Michael Baldwin sent me three lyrics, I put them to music, and we started making a record—started making the record that became *Corrected Slogans* [1976], started recording the material, and Bob financed part of it, finally gave me a thousand bucks, flew Michael and his wife to Florida.

Michael arrived at the airport and we had to go and get him because they seized his passport. He and I had to go to Miami to get his passport back and went and interviewed the guy at immigration and they said, “Why did you take it?” He said, “I designed this stamp and I couldn't

figure out how in the world you got one,” he said, “But I’ve checked. It’s kosher, blah-blah-blah. Here you go. Welcome to the United States.” I’m sitting there, I said, “Wonder what’s going to happen to John Lennon.” I said, “Why are you all so upset about John Lennon?” He said, “Ah, that’s over, don’t worry about that.” Sure enough, a few weeks later John Lennon was given his papers. This was ’73, -4, -5. Carter was coming into office, things were changing, out of [Richard M.] Nixon, out of this feel, into something slightly different.

I wanted to tell you—I’ll tell you later about it. It goes with the Naples business. We went to Pompeii one afternoon with Ileana. It’s not so interesting. But what happened was that Bob began to gather that I was being politicized. It must have occurred to him that I was being politicized in no uncertain terms and by the time we fell out in the way that I told you about, it was painfully clear there. But before that, there was some dysfunction between us and he and I happened to be in New York at the same time, and he tried to talk to me about it in too intimate a way. I just wasn’t—I rejected— No. That was the end of it.

Again I really am convinced that Bob thought— A lot of people, they look at me and they think I’m a puritan, puritanical and too conservative and all that kind of stuff because I don’t share anything with anybody. I don’t let it hang out; it’s nobody’s business. I don’t need to belong to people, I don’t need to run around naked with a bunch of people to feel like I’m okay. And that’s what’s going on in my generation. I rejected all that stuff deliberately. I thought it was garbage.

Q: Do you think that you two could have had the conversation that he was trying to have in a different way?

Thompson: Part of it.

Q: So what would that part have been?

Thompson: First come to an understanding. I'm not uptight. "Back up. You want to talk ideas? Sit down. Let's talk." Then we would've talked. But I would've had to get him to back off of the personal.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: That's what it would've taken. Let's get this on some other footing. Because as much regard for you and as much warmth, feeling I have for you, this is not all bound up for me the way it is for you. I will never be convinced the way that you are and those you love dearest are. I can understand why you do not love me in the same way and you might like to and you're a man who likes to solve problems and make things happen and get them to work out, and so on like that. But I will not go there with you. It's just I don't feel it.

Q: Okay. He wanted there to be a different feeling, a different connection.

Thompson: I didn't want anything.

Q: He did.

Thompson: He wanted something else, yeah. Me, I'm just going on. I don't know how to put it any other way than that. I met a lot of great people over the years and I asked a friend of mine in Germany one time, I said, "This guy we both know, this rich guy with a castle, blah-blah-blah—" and I said, "Why was he always a problem between us?" My friend said, "Because you don't respect him. He looks at you and he knows you don't respect him. And that's the end of it." And it's true. Bob would know that I respected him and I wanted to keep it on a level of respect. I did not know how to go into this other place. It's just not in me. I'm not that kind of person.

Q: Right. And you spoke about how he would know that you were being politicized. Was that a problem for him?

Thompson: No. Only personally. But I thought politically he would not disagree with me. He thought he held the same thing and we informed him that his thought came to something else. I think it did. I still do. I still do believe that Bob belongs to the end, the end of Modernism, the end of the great arts, the great seamed art story where this leads to that and that leads to that and that—in an orderly fashion. There are the people who are intensely engaged with these ideas. That goes on everywhere now. Everywhere, everybody's doing it. In those days it was less. It was possible to stand out in a crowd because there wasn't one. To look like a crowd, to be a crowd, the services section, who were desperately in need of some meaningful coexistence, and I mean that as a social coexistence above the usual social things, plus a whole new way of expanding the business into new social realms, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I was trained as a Modernist and Postmodernism to me seemed to be Modernism continued under other premises. And now what do we have? We have anything goes. If you can make it stick, good luck to you. But still, somewhere there's a section, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Franz West, almost Mike Kelley. He won't—it'll be something—Mike will be assimilated in a different way. That is my hypothesis. But there are some—there's a moment in the film where Larry Weiner was filmed by Clemente in Venice, young Larry sitting there in one of the two cafes, and they say, "Bob Rauschenberg is becoming art history." And he says, "But Bob is a very clever man and I don't know if he will be art history or not." So you see that kind of thinking, his undercurrent, that's a Conceptualist thing and Bob knew what that was. And one of Bob's aphorisms was, you better keep moving because if you stop, people can just run over you.

Q: If you stop what?

Thompson: Because if you stop, somebody's going to run over you. He put it much more elegantly. You're going to get in the way or you're going to get knocked down—that kind of thing. He believed in progress and that it led upward. He saw this in a good light. He saw everything that happened in a good light. I see everything that happens and think, "Oh, everything happens. It's all interdependent."

Q: Who do you think he might see as his—the people who are in his lineage?

Thompson: Hmm. Who's that sculptor who just died recently? Who bundles together junk and puts Don Judd on it or some other guy puts another label on it. Lived out here. His name will come to me. Jason Rhoades. I would say that Jason Rhoades learned something from looking at Rauschenberg. I would say every artist learns something from looking at Rauschenberg. Albert Oehlen I know well and Albert and I have talked about it, and the preferences would be for Rauschenberg over Johns, and there's a dispute over Johns. I may be misrepresenting Albert; he might've changed his mind, I have no idea, but we've had this conversation.

Who else? Not so many. Liz Larner knows a lot about materials and a lot about sculpture, and Bob—that's the difference. Bob is not a sculptor, he's something else. He mixes sculptural works, but he's not a pure sculptor in the way that you would say that Liz Larner's a sculptor. I wouldn't, anyway.

Q: Well, what about on you? Is there—

Thompson: Mike Kelley, to some extent, because of his typologies of symbol types, symbol shapes, and those kinds of things.

Q: For you, when you think about the end of that chapter in your life, have you told me the end?

Have we—

Thompson: There is no end to that chapter. There is no end. There are no chapters to my life. And there is no end to that stuff. I will wrestle with those problems the rest of my life. There's nothing that's settled as you hear.

Q: I don't mean internally, I mean as far as the narrative goes.

Thompson: Have I left anything out? [Laughs]

Q: Is there anything that you want to add?

Thompson: Any last words, yeah. No, just— Just occasions of sitting at dinner with him and with people in Italy sometimes or sitting in Venice with him and a bunch of people, Ileana and Leo and Leo's new wife Toiny Castelli, and a bunch of people before going off. Sitting there and—know what Rauschenberg gave me? He never said to me, “Shut up, kid,” or, “Who do you think you are?” I was allowed to think whoever I am and say whatever I wanted. I could even insult him to some extent. Once, he was saying something about somebody, rather a dark aspect, and I said, “On est la qui mal y pense” (one is there who thinks evil)—playing on the old saying “Honi soit—” (shame on whoever, et cetera). Toiny, being French, laughed heartily and so did Ileana and Leo and Antonio, all the people who spoke French laughed and who knew the Latin slogan laughed. But Bob didn't know either one of them, not the French nor the Latin. But it didn't matter. Didn't bother him.

I didn't do it out of meanness or anything else like that. It just pfft, came out. And he could stand that, bless his heart. I continued to learn from that. Good lessons, that kind of thing. Again this responsibility thing. Mike Kelley also felt it. I remember chatting with him one time when he was making this really spectacular stuff in New York and people were criticizing him and he's saying, "It falls to Paul McCarthy and I, the opportunity to do these things, and we have a responsibility to do it because it's possible and that's what goes with the turf." It's a job. It's alienated labor. [Laughs]

Q: I asked you about other artists who might have learned something from Rauschenberg. Did you feel that his work influenced the music that you made later?

Thompson: No. What I found was that when I saw his art, I thought this guy would understand the music.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: And surely he would've understood it. I don't know if he ever heard it or not. It's not impossible.

Q: David White remembered that you two were on a panel together in Munich. Was it for the traveling show? Or do you—

Thompson: It was the show that traveled around. [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2008]

Q: Okay. And what were you talking about there?

Thompson: The film.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: I know Fredericka— If you want to know about Mrs. de Menil, she's the one to ask. I wish I could tell you more about Madame. Apart from the fact that she was a fantastic dame. Nice people. You've seen that book, the de Menil project book? [Note: Josef Helfenstein, Lauren Schipsi, and Suzanne D. Booth, *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil*, 2010] There's a photograph where they're with Duchamp and I'm in that photograph.



Marcel Duchamp speaking with students and Dominique de Menil (far right), University of St. Thomas Art Department, Houston, 1965. Mayo Thompson pictured seated (far left). Image from Josef Helfenstein, Lauren Schipsi, and Suzanne D. Booth, *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique De Menil*, Houston: Menil Collection, 2010, p. 283

Q: You've taken a lot of photographs. I know that the Foundation has some of your photographs in their archives.

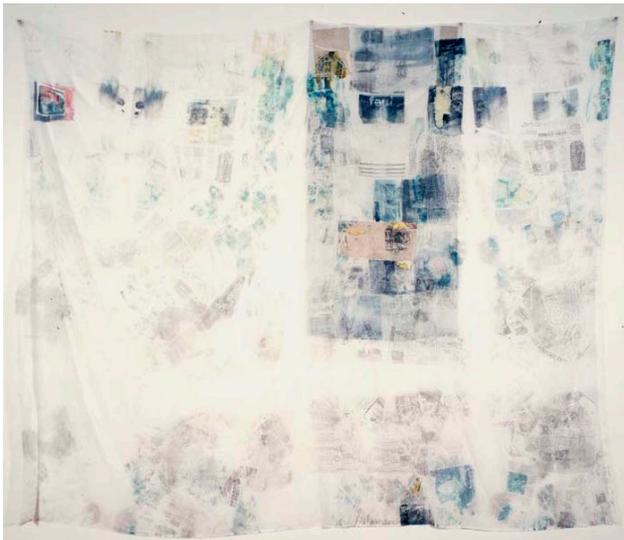
Thompson: In that Israel book. Christine had a Nikon and I took snaps. I like to take pictures. But this thing is wonderful.

Q: Yeah, they are, aren't they?

Thompson: Bob would figure out some way. He would pick on this thing and he would show you the significance, the formal significance of it. He would make something with it. He tackled new technology. I pooh-poohed the technology connection to some extent only because it was like people were on their way to the moon soon and it was like one of those times and people were telling themselves all kinds of weird stuff. It's easy to laugh at. But he did engage with all that stuff. The show that was at Mr. Gagosian's here of the shiny objects—and you see Bob

putting his mark on all kinds of things. From when I looked at it, I thought to myself, not junk—precious goods, precious materials, but mediated with the same hand and the same eye and turned into the same kind of stuff.

I'll send you the film. When you look at it, you watch him make the *Hoarfrost*, just watch him. He'll get a piece of paper and he'll go scrunch-scrunch and put it someplace. And he's working in three dimensions backwards or making a two-dimensional object out of three-dimensional stuff and doing it backwards because when the thing is printed, the other side is what the public will see. [Laughs] He's got this kind of mental capacity and that's fascinating to watch. *I Love Lucy* running in the background.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Yard (Hoarfrost)*, 1974  
Solvent transfer on fabric and collage  
115 x 136 inches (292.1 x 345.4 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: I've pretty much covered the outline. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about or that you think is important to include or that we haven't touched upon?

Thompson: No.

Q: Okay. Then we can be done.

Thompson: Thank you very much.

Q: Thank you. It was really a pleasure to speak with you.

Thompson: And you.

Q: Thank you.

Thompson: I cherish these times forever.

[END OF INTERVIEW]