

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Calvin Tomkins

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Calvin Tomkins conducted by Mary Marshall Clark on March 21, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

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

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Calvin Tomkins

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark

Date: March 21, 2015

Q: Today is March 21, 2015. My name is Mary Marshall Clark. I work for the Columbia Center for Oral History Research. And I'm very proud to be interviewing Calvin Tomkins, who has graciously given his time for memories of Bob Rauschenberg.

I really want you to do all the talking, but given your bronchial situation, all the talking you can do. I was charmed by your statement somewhere that you were really introduced to contemporary art through encountering Bob Rauschenberg.

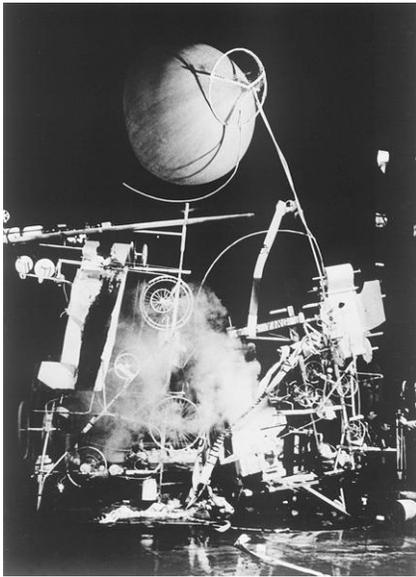
Tomkins: Yes. That's really true in all sorts of ways although my introduction came a little bit earlier. I was writing for *Newsweek* magazine in the mid-fifties. *Newsweek* in those days had no art department, had no art column and no art writer. And neither did *Time*. Which shows how things have changed. It wasn't considered newsworthy.

Once in a while, somebody in the top editorial staff would decide that there was a story on art that they should cover, so they would pull somebody from another section of the magazine. I had that experience. I was called up and told, "Go and interview Marcel Duchamp." This was in '59, the year of the first monograph on Duchamp's work. It was published simultaneously in Paris and New York. It was news. There were a lot of people that had forgotten Duchamp was even around. And so I went to the St. Regis Hotel [New York], to the King Cole Bar, and he was there

ahead of me. I had, I guess, a two-hour interview with him. And I was so fascinated and surprised and interested in him and the things he said that it really started me thinking about contemporary art. I hadn't even thought about it before.

And so as soon as I left *Newsweek* for the *New Yorker*, which was a year later in 1960, I began writing about art. The first piece I did was a profile on Jean Tinguely. I didn't know anything. And so I was asking advice from a lot of people. "Who should I talk to about him?" And several people said, "Well, you must talk to Bob Rauschenberg."

When Tinguely came here to do his great *Homage to New York* [1960], the machine that destroyed itself in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA, New York], he had not been to this country before, but he knew some of the artists and he met several others, one of whom was Bob Rauschenberg. And they got along extremely well. Although Tinguely then spoke no English and Rauschenberg no French, they got along.



Jean Tinguely  
*Homage to New York*, 1960

And Tinguely asked Bob to contribute something to the piece. Bob's contribution was a money thrower [*Money Thrower for Tinguely's H.T.N.Y.*, 1960]. He made a thing consisting of two heavy springs and between them was a bunch of coins. I think they were silver dollars. At a certain point a fuse was activated and the springs flew apart and the coins were scattered over Tinguely's machine.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*The Money Thrower for Tinguely's H.T.N.Y.*, 1960  
Electric heater with gun powder, metal springs, twine, and silver dollars  
6 3/4 x 22 1/2 x 4 inches (17.1 x 57.2 x 10.2 cm)  
Moderna Museet, Stockholm  
Donation 2005 from Pontus Hulten

So of course I interviewed Bob. This was the first time I'd met him. And once again, as with Duchamp, I was completely fascinated. I hadn't studied art. I took one art course in college, Italian Renaissance painting, and that was all. And it was all so surprising to me. All my vague ideas about what art was were overthrown when I interviewed Bob and I immediately thought, "Well, he's a great subject. I'd like to do a profile on him." Which I did.

I think there were one or two profiles in between that, but I did Bob, I think, in '63 or '4. It came out in '64 [*New Yorker*, Feb. 29, 1964]. It was really in Bob's studio that I began to get an idea of what art could be or how many different things it could be. One of the big surprises I suppose, like most people I'd always thought of art as a form of self-expression. And as you were saying, Bob had no interest in expressing himself in art. In fact he said, "I think art should be a lot more interesting than that—than my personality."

We got along extremely well although it was always somewhat frustrating. He was in the Broadway studio then, on Twelfth Street and Broadway [809 Broadway] above a billiard table factory. It was a big studio, a big, long, former industrial space. And there were always a lot of people in it. He was living with Steve Paxton then. This was after Jasper [Johns]. And he was doing a lot of different things. He was working on a piece for the New York World's Fair for Philip Johnson [[Skyway](#), 1964] and he was working for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as really a stage manager, but he was doing the costumes and sets.



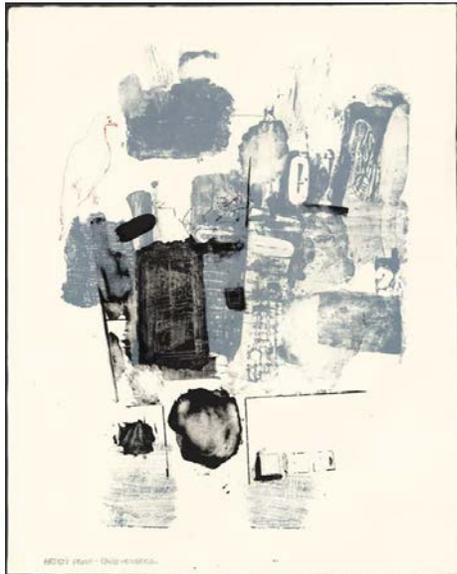
Robert Rauschenberg  
*Skyway*, 1964  
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas  
216 x 192 inches (548.6 x 487.7 cm)  
Dallas Museum of Art  
The Roberta Coke Camp Fund, The 500, Inc., Mr. and  
Mrs. Mark Shepherd Jr. and General Acquisitions  
Funds

So all these things were going on and there were always people coming in and out of the studio. And if it wasn't somebody from one of these activities he was involved in or another artist, it was [Tatyana] Tanya Grosman who had discovered him and was working with him to make prints.

Q: Was [Kenneth E.] Ken Tyler around at that time, working with him too?

Tomkins: Yes, but I didn't meet him. I didn't know him at that time—until later. But Tanya was around a lot because she was having trouble persuading him to do a lithograph. At one point, he said, "I didn't understand why, in the twentieth century, we should be drawing on rocks." But she was very persistent. It seemed like every time, I would have to wait until he had finished talking with her or until there was a gap between meetings with other people so I could interview

him. I would often spend a whole day there, just sitting around waiting to talk with him [Note: Rauschenberg made his first print with Grosman, *Abby's Bird*, in 1962.]



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Abby's Bird*, 1962  
Lithograph  
23 x 17 15/16 inches (58.4 x 45.6 cm)  
From an edition of 50, published by Universal Limited  
Art Editions, West Islip, New York

But in spite of that, he was so winning and so effervescent and so full of vitality and fun and life that I just loved being there. The whole thing of being there was just enormously pleasurable. And he would always, no matter how long it took, there'd always be a time when he would sit down and really talk about things and his gift—his verbal gift—was quite amazing.

As you know, he had severe dyslexia as a child when nobody knew what that was. He was just told he was stupid because he had terrible trouble learning to read. But he was a wonderful talker. Very vivid. Almost everything he said was memorable in one way or another.

I watched him work. He was doing the first series of colored silkscreen paintings. He had done the black-and-white ones and he was working on the first colored silkscreens. And that was just totally fascinating, watching that process. He would do four or five big canvases at once, out on the floor where he put the screens he had had made up. He wasn't doing them as you ought to do them with exact measurements so the calibration is perfect. He'd gotten bored with that and he was putting them down slightly out of register, so the colors would get blurred. He would sometimes look and say, "That's a nice color." At one point, he said, "It's like these colors are all trying to be stars."



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Archive*, 1963  
 Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas  
 83 7/8 x 60 inches (213 x 152.4 cm)  
 Collection of the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff  
 Modern Art Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Brace*, 1962  
 Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas  
 60 x 60 inches (152.4 x 152.4 cm)  
 Collection of the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff  
 Modern Art Foundation

His whole working process was so unpredictable.

Q: Can you take us into that studio and just tell as much as you remember about that process?

Tomkins: Well, I don't know what the factory had been making before he was there, but it was a big, long room. Maybe a hundred feet long by thirty feet wide and windows in front on Broadway and no windows elsewhere. But he would work in about the middle half of it. He had his living accommodations over to one side, against the wall. He had partitioned off one section with a stove and some shelves. And a mattress on the floor was the bed. And aside from that it was all workspace.



Rauschenberg in his Broadway studio, New York, ca. 1962. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Attributed to Steve Paxton

So a large part of the floor would be covered with these canvases, stretched canvases, laid flat on the floor. When he worked he'd be doing other things too, but he was able to come back and no matter how many interruptions, he could always refocus with no problems at all. He worked in a

kind of effortless way. There was no stress. It seemed like he didn't do much stopping and thinking and stepping back to look. He would just put down a screen and squeegee the color over it. Then pick it up and look at it for a minute or so. Then he'd take another screen, not waiting for the first one to dry.

It seemed like such a free, open, almost casual way of working. But there was something going on there that I didn't understand until much later. There was this uncanny precision of his own design sense, how one thing would go here and how one image would work not necessarily with another, but against another. How the image of a big clock face would work in conjunction with a geometrical drawing or a very simple image like a plain glass of water or a pile of blankets. A lot of these images that he had made into silkscreens were for ads in magazines. But he also used very different images, not connected to that in any way.

And he would work with them. All these different relationships. Shape, contour, color, reference. And this was all going on continuously without much or any forethought. He said once, "I don't want to work schemingly." He was only comfortable when he was, as he said, "When I'm unfamiliar with what I'm doing. As soon as I get too familiar with what I'm doing then I stop and do something else."

But there was this amazing continuing process at work. It certainly had nothing to do with self-expression. It had a lot to do with the contemporary world, with images that were drawn directly from the contemporary world. He said that discovering the silkscreen process was like Christmas to him. That for years he would go out on the street and find stuff and bring it back and use it in

paintings, and this was like being able to do that, but without having to go out and forage. You find an image that had already appeared in the world.

His being able to work with them so fluidly, to put things together that sometimes worked against each other so strongly that they made you a little bit uneasy, but without— There was no sense that anything he did didn't work. In fact I never saw him throw away a canvas that he thought he'd spoiled. I'm sure it happened, but I don't think I ever saw it. He just had this immediacy. It just kept moving; the process kept moving. And it was an organic process that came right out of him and it didn't look like the work of anybody else.

This was all so interesting to me because I had this vague idea of painting as a very deliberate pursuit. That it was preceded by drawings and then preliminary studies and this long process where you perfect the thing and then finally you do a finished version. It was nothing like that. It was completely spontaneous and open and direct. So this was all a revelation to me.

Q: What was he like to interview?

Tomkins: When you got down to it, he was great. Again, he was open, spontaneous, and very fluid. He was highly intelligent. He would often say things that I found sort of startling.

Q: Can you remember an example?

Tomkins: I think I used them all in the profile. I don't think I can call them up at the moment, but I just remember often being struck with this reporter's feeling of, "That's going to be in the piece."

Q: Yes. So when you began to structure the piece, you wrote about seeing *Double Feature* [1959] and its impact on you. And I think you talked about how you dropped a coin in the pocket? Could you tell that story?



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Double Feature*, 1959  
Combine: oil, paper, printed paper, printed reproductions, and fabric on canvas  
90 3/4 x 52 inches (230.5 x 132.1 cm)  
Kunstmuseum Basel  
On deposit from Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation,  
Aachen, Germany

Tomkins: Yes. This was in the Museum of Modern Art. The painting was in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art [*Sixteen Americans*, 1959–60]. This may have been before I had started talking with him. I had seen it in a show. And it just stopped me in my tracks. It looked so different from other things in the show. There was something about it that was so arresting. A man's shirt with a pocket in it, sort of torn—a fragment of a shirt.

Another thing about Bob's work is that it reversed the Renaissance perspective. Instead of looking into the painting, the painting came out towards you—a very friendly gesture. And here was this old work shirt with a pocket open. I thought, "I'd love to put something in it."

Q: Well, I'll confess my ignorance and my geographical beginnings by saying the first time I encountered one of his Combines in the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York], I just looked at it and said, "That artist is Southern," I'm Southern so I just knew it instantly, "and rural."

Tomkins: Yes. Anyway, I looked around and there were no guards and there was nobody else in the room. And I took a coin, I think it was a quarter or something, and slipped it into the pocket of the shirt.

Q: Good of you to admit it. Could you paint a portrait of the art world at that time? The legacy of the Abstract Expressionists [AbEx] and how you saw him relating or not relating to others around him? And who were the influences on him?

Tomkins: What people forget is how small the art world was at that time. As I noted, there was no art writing in *Newsweek* or *Time*. There was no publicity about what was happening in American art aside from the very small group of dealers, collectors. There was almost nobody interested. And when I began you could on a Saturday morning see all of the new shows that had opened during that week of contemporary work. There was no problem. You could easily do it.

For me, the key person in the art world at that time was Leo Castelli. Fortunately I became friendly with him quite early. Of course he was Rauschenberg's dealer. And he was unusual among dealers in that he was very open and friendly towards members of the press. He encouraged you to write about his artists even if you weren't a certified critic. He helped to arrange meetings. He was totally responsive to the idea that it would be good to have his artists written about.

I spent a lot of time with Leo. Went to all of his shows. And that's where the art world seemed to be centered at that moment. Bob wasn't personally all that close to Leo, but he was so open and friendly that he was always with people. He was with people in the dance world from his work with Merce Cunningham. He was pretty friendly with Jim Dine, with Alex Hay. I'm trying to think of who else he saw a lot of. He talked to Andy Warhol on the phone. I don't think they were personal friends, but I remember several long telephone conversations with Andy when I was in his studio.

Q: Do you recall hearing what those conversations were about?

Tomkins: I think one was about the Philip Johnson commission for the New York World's Fair building. Johnson had commissioned several artists to do pieces and Andy wanted to know what Bob was doing and how big it was going to be. He wanted to pick his brain.

But there were other artists who were not as well-known. Öyvind [A. C.] Fahlström was another—a person that he seemed to be very interested in. Of course he knew Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle and when they were in New York, it was often with them.

Jasper he was no longer seeing. I missed the time when he was with Jasper. But John Cage used to say it was such a fascination to be with both of them because of the energy, the sparks. The conversation, he said, was like nothing else he had ever experienced.

Q: Do you have any idea why they broke up?

Tomkins: Well, I think it happened over Steve Paxton. The Cunningham company had a residency at Connecticut College [New London]. In the summer, they were all up there and Bob was there also. And this is all hearsay. I don't really know this. But I think Bob and Steve Paxton began having an affair that summer at Connecticut College. And when Jasper learned about it, I think he broke off his relationship with Bob immediately.

Q: Right. Before we get into the artwork per se and while we're still talking about his relationships, I've done four sessions with [Susan] Sue Weil recently and she was a great delight. So I assume you talked to her as a part of your profile? Or did you?

Tomkins: Yes, I did.

Q: And in your profile, you indicated that perhaps she received some pressure from her family to break off with Bob in '52.

Tomkins: Well, I think that related to the summer of 1952. This was after the birth of Christopher [“Chris” Rauschenberg]. Bob went back to Black Mountain [College, North Carolina] that summer, where they had gone to school. And it became sort of a second home for Bob. He went back then and he went back for that whole summer. That was the summer of the event by John Cage that got everybody involved in doing something in the dining room—

Q: The Happening? [Note: an untitled event later referred to as *Theater Piece No. 1*]

Tomkins: The first Happening, yes. I think it was that summer that Bob became involved with Cy Twombly because it was right after that that he and Cy went to Italy. And I think that Sue's parents had become increasingly disturbed by their relationship. I heard that they had put some pressure on her. Bob's going away to Black Mountain for the summer, I think, was the crusher that sort of ended that relationship.

Q: It's interesting because she may have felt differently at the time. I know she was greatly pained. But she has absolutely no bitterness about it now and neither does Chris. I've interviewed him as well. I think that Sue made sure to stay in relation with him. He sent her flowers every time she had a birthday. And they made a real effort to keep enjoying each other. They were really the Bobbsey Twins. They worked in such similar ways. They got up and went to work at eight.

Tomkins: Yes. And for years they were just inseparable. They just loved being together.

Q: Yes. Was Bob open with you about his homosexuality?

Tomkins: No. In those years, people were not. It was not open. Everybody knew about it, but you didn't talk about it openly, particularly with someone who was writing about you. I just had a very clear sense that it would have been extremely hurtful if I'd mentioned it openly.

And also I'm not sure that the *New Yorker* would've allowed it. The *New Yorker* was quite prudish in those days. Anyway, I didn't say anything openly about it, but I think it was fairly clear to anybody reading the piece. And then when I did the book on Bob some years later, I did say something about it. That they were more than friends. The intensity of their relationship was—I don't know. It was much more vague. But in the early sixties it just wasn't something you talked about.

Q: Well, Bob must have been very impressed that he had a *New Yorker* writer coming to write about him in such an in-depth way. How did he feel about what other people thought about him? Was he interested?

Tomkins: I'm not sure he was impressed. I don't think he had a clear idea of what the *New Yorker* was and the importance of it in American journalism. And he was just open to this stuff.

In the beginning, he said, “Well, if you want to waste your time doing that, it’s all right with me.”

To him I think it was just another thing that was going on in his life. I don’t think he felt it was of any great importance in any way. But he was interested in the process and in going back over his life. I think that sort of interested him. Maybe he hadn’t done it before. He would seem to become animated in talking about his childhood and his experience in the Navy and his going to Paris for the first time.

Q: The first time he was in an art museum, at Huntington [Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California], during the Navy.

Tomkins: Yes. Yes. He seemed to enjoy talking about it. Sometimes he talked as though he was discovering things about himself as he went along. He was so open about how he knew nothing at all about art. He never knew there was such a thing as art.

Q: That’s remarkable.

Tomkins: Well, growing up in Port Arthur, Texas, which is a foot below sea level, he just had never seen it. And as he said, all through his childhood he was making drawings. And he just thought, “Well, everybody does that.” It wasn’t until he got into the Navy and he began making drawings of other guys in his company and they were really impressed—they sent the drawings home to their parents. That was the first time he realized that his drawings were anything special.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Soulfull* [portrait of Kimble “Kip” M. Williams], 1945  
Pencil on paper  
9 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (24.1 x 21.6 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: And he hung onto that to some degree?

Tomkins: Yes.

Q: Do you think that was part of his gift that he hung onto his naïveté?

Tomkins: Yes. Jasper Johns mentioned that when I talked to him. I guess it wasn't at the time because I didn't talk to him until years later, but he said there was this naïveté about Bob. He called it a wonderful naïveté and it went along with a real sophistication about the world, how the world worked. But Jasper said he was always amazed that Bob seemed to think that he would just do his work and somehow or other, other people would support it. Jasper said, “I never

thought that. I always felt that I had to win the support of people before I could do anything with it.”

Q: Thank you for that. And we may shift a bit to his entering the art world and your description of his influences—who he influenced and how he was influenced, if he was. Because I was curious about the breadth of that term “environment.” Did it include other artists or was it really the real world, the world he saw on the street?

Tomkins: Well, Bob was interested in everything. And of course once he officially became an artist when he showed with Betty Parsons [Gallery, New York, in 1951], I think he was very interested in learning more about the art world and about meeting more artists.

He was so poor in those days. There were times when he would have one meal a day, which was mostly bananas he picked up on the waterfront outside of the United Fruit Company dock. He would spend fifteen cents a day on food. That was his limit. He didn't really have money enough even to come uptown on the subway.

But now and then he would come up to the Club, the Artists' Club. And he would go to the Cedar bar [Cedar Tavern, New York] and nurse one beer all evening. I think he was very interested in being in New York. And some of the older generation of artists were very good to him, particularly Franz Kline. He spoke gratefully about Kline who was interested in young artists and would really try to help them.

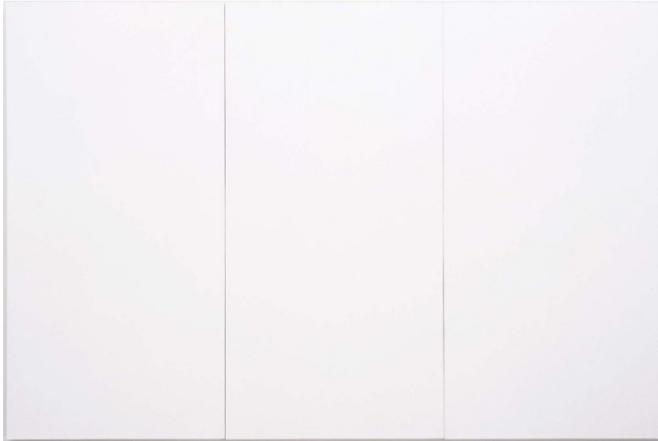
Then he did spend time at the Art Students League [of New York] and met other artists of his generation there. But for a long while, he was on the fringes of the art world. He was considered an amusing kid by most of the AbEx people. I don't think they took him seriously for a long time.

Q: When would you date that? To the '58 show [note: first solo exhibition at Leo Castelli, New York]?

Tomkins: No earlier—the show at Betty Parsons.

Q: Although you said at one point in one of your pieces that he anticipated Minimalism in a deep way. It wasn't really recognized until later.

Tomkins: Yes. Well with the *White Paintings* [1951]—you could hardly get more minimal than that—and the black paintings [1951–53]. But I don't think there was any sort of theory involved in his mind in that. He was doing whatever interested him at that moment. I think it was only later that it occurred to him that he had anticipated Minimalism. But you can never really think of Bob as a Minimalist artist. It's always multiplicity and variation and inclusion. Bring everything into the art rather than reduce, reduce, reduce to its essentials.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*White Painting* [three panel], 1951  
Oil on canvas  
72 x 108 inches (182.9 x 274.3 cm)  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis



Robert Rauschenberg  
Untitled [Glossy Black Painting], ca. 1951  
Oil and paper on canvas  
71 1/2 x 52 3/4 inches (181.6 x 134 cm)  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis

But he was always a very good talker. He was always highly verbal and intelligent. And I think when he would come up to the Cedar bar he must have been interesting, certainly to Kline. I think also to [Willem] de Kooning. Of course the thing that interested de Kooning was the idea of Bob's wanting to erase one of his drawings [*Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953]. And that incident has been so, so misunderstood.



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: In what way?

Tomkins: Well, people have said it was an act of aggression. Of, “You have to kill the father before you can supplant him.” That he was somehow trying to erase de Kooning who was at that time the number one American artist in the minds of all the others.

But his explanation for doing it was that he had tried erasing some of his own work. He was trying to make a work of art by the technique of erasing. It’s how his mind worked. “Can you make a work of art by erasing?” And he tried it with his own work. And that didn’t work because it was only half of the process. He couldn’t be sure that his own work was art. It had to really be art. And de Kooning was the artist who was unquestionably the most important artist of the whole period.

So he got up his nerve and went to see de Kooning and explained what he wanted to do. And he said de Kooning didn't like it much at first. He didn't like the idea. But gradually he understood it. And he went and got three portfolios of drawings. He looked through one and he didn't see anything. He looked through another and pulled out one. He said, "No, that would be too easy." And then he got a third portfolio and leafed through it and found a drawing and he said, "This is going to be really hard." It had several different kinds of drawing in grease pencil and crayon and ink. And he said, "Okay. You can have this one."

So de Kooning participated willingly, completely, in this project. I think Bob saw it as a joint project. He said he spent three weeks on it. He wore out about forty erasers. And he said it really worked. It was a work of art that was created by the technique of erasing. And so he said, "That's why I didn't have to do it anymore. That was it."

Q: Right. He always moved on.

I was curious about the *Bed* [1955]. When I interviewed Sue, she talked about their time in Paris and how they didn't have any fun at Académie Julian and they were painting near a room where they were sleeping. And they were testing out paints.

Tomkins: I know that they had used the front room in their pension as a studio. Bob said, "Whenever one of us spilled a drop of paint in one place, we'd go and put the same color in other places around the rug."

But my sense was that Bob was looked on as kind of a joke by the older artists. And then gradually he became kind of like a mascot; they sort of liked him but didn't think he was serious. And then when he did the *White Paintings* and the black paintings, they resented him. That was a big occasion.

Q: Why did they resent him?

Tomkins: Probably because they felt he was infringing on their copyright. [Ad] Reinhardt had done black paintings. And I think that another artist had done all white paintings. One of the older artists. I forget which one it was. I saw the *White Paintings* at—what was the gallery he went to? I can't think of it [note: *Rauschenberg: Paintings and Sculpture*, Stable Gallery, New York, 1953].

Q: It'll come back and we'll fill it in.

Tomkins: And one of the AbEx guys went to this show and said, "What's the matter with him? Does he think it's easy?" I think they thought he was a faker. That he was just trying to get attention.

But then with the red show at Egan he got a lot of attention, not all of it favorable by any means. [Note: exhibition of red painting series (1953–54) *Joyeux Noël* by *Rauschenberg*, Charles Egan Gallery, New York, 1954–55] But he did get attention and the older people realized that he was

serious, that he was ambitious. He wasn't just that crazy kid. I think that's when they began to resent him because they had reason to.



Installation view of *Joyeux Noël* by Rauschenberg, Charles Egan Gallery, New York, 1954–55. Pictured left to right: *Untitled* (1954) [no longer extant], *Yoicks* (1954), *Untitled* (1954). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: He might displace them.

Tomkins: Yes. It happened fairly quickly after 1960. That whole second generation of AbEx painters were pretty much wiped off the map.

Q: Could you describe a little bit of the relationship between the Action painters and Bob?

Tomkins: You mean de Kooning and Bob?

Q: Yes.

Tomkins: Well, they weren't— The top people were not threatened. It was the second generation whose markets evaporated when Pop art emerged.

But thinking about it, I don't think that Bob had a lot of interest in the work of the Pop artists. He knew them all of course, but the only one he was ever really friendly with was [James] Jim Rosenquist. They became quite close and then Jim moved to Florida after Bob was there. Jim sort of idolized him. But I don't think he was ever close to [Roy] Lichtenstein or [Claes] Oldenburg. And not to Warhol either. Like a lot of artists, once he hit his own stride he wasn't that much interested in being with other artists.

Q: Was that part of his reason for leaving New York, do you think?

Tomkins: I think it was part of the reason. I think there were other reasons too. He was drinking a lot, too much.

He was drinking more and more. He had quite a bit of success. And I think he was finding it harder to work. He had always been able to work no matter how many interruptions or distractions, but I have the sense that he was beginning to feel that New York was too distracting that there was too much—too many people wanted things from him.

Q: As you wrote in *Off the Wall* [1980, 2005], you have a chapter called the “End of an Era.” Do you think he felt it was an end of an era?

Tomkins: Maybe. All these things are so complicated. I can't remember his move to Florida.

Was that in the late—

Q: '70.

Tomkins: In '70. One thing that it ended was his working relationship with Cunningham and Cage. And that was quite traumatic.

Q: Do you know why it ended or—

Tomkins: Yes. What I wrote about it in *Off the Wall*— The problems began with the Cunningham Company's world tour in 1964. It was the first time the company had had a really important series of engagements outside of this country. And it was a very touch-and-go thing to see if they could raise the money. The State Department had absolutely refused to give them funds for international appearance.

They had scraped together enough money to start on the trip, but they had to raise money for other things that came up. The problems really reached a head at the Venice Biennale in '64 because this was the year that Bob Rauschenberg won. The first time an American artist had won the main International [Grand] Prize in Painting. And Bob won it. [Note: Americans received the prize on two previous occasions, James McNeill Whistler in 1895 and Mark Tobey in 1958.]

There was an enormous amount of publicity and pro and con. There were a lot of people who

were very opposed to Bob's winning it. This was really the watershed of his reputation. Before then he'd been sort of the bad boy. He'd been struggling. And now, all of a sudden, he was recognized as a really important artist. In England a review called him, "The most important American artist since Jackson Pollock."



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

So it was no longer possible to dismiss him. His whole life sort of changed after that. But it was also a big problem for Cunningham and Cage because until then Bob had been a loyal collaborator and had been in service to promote Merce's genius. Everybody believed Merce was the greatest choreographer of the century. And a lot of people were willing to give up everything of their own to help Merce.

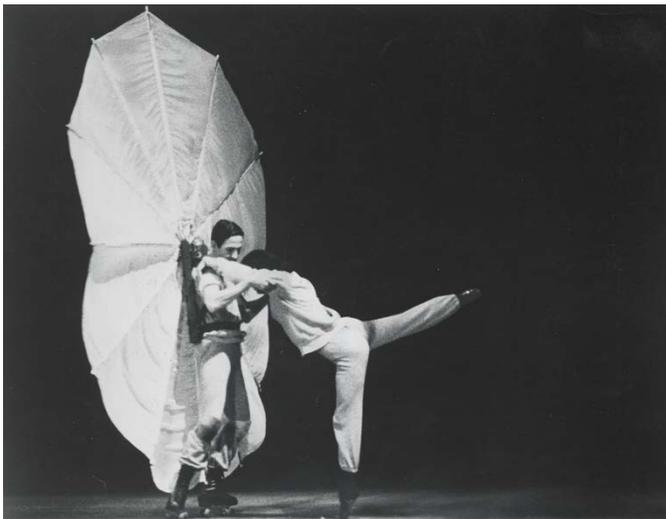
Bob himself had done this. He had subordinated his own interests time and time again. But in Venice, all of a sudden, he was a major celebrity. Reporters were all interested in him and what

he had to say about the company. And he said a couple of things that made John Cage feel he was talking as though it was his company, not Merce's company.

But then he and Alex Hay and Steve Paxton were also—Bob couldn't resist any sort of artistic activity. He wanted to be a dancer too and a choreographer. And he and Alex Hay and a couple of others had done some performances including one with Merce's great dancer, Carolyn Brown.

Q: Carolyn, yes.

Tomkins: He and Alex Hay had done a dance with Carolyn Brown in which they were on roller skates wearing costumes made out of parachutes, these enormous wing-like costumes. And Carolyn was en pointe in a tutu—no, not tutu but in a ballet leotard. And they would swoop around on roller skates and at times pick her up and carry her [*Pelican*, 1963]. And I think Merce was terrified that she was going to get injured.



Rauschenberg and Carolyn Brown performing Rauschenberg's *Pelican* (1963). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

But this was a huge hit. And this led them to want to do more, so they did some performances of their own in Europe. They did a performance in Stockholm and there was a lot of publicity about that [note: Five New York Evenings, Moderna Museet, 1964; program included Rauschenberg's *Elgin Tie* and *Shot Put*, both 1964]. And I think John Cage in particular felt that Bob was being disloyal. So there was quite a bit of tension. And then at another point during the tour, when they went to Asia, they ran out of money. And Bob said, "Well, I guess old Bob will have to get out the crayons," which he did. And sold a couple of things. And got them enough money to continue.

But then the whole thing came apart in Japan. A lot of bad feeling had built up. I think John and Merce felt that Bob had allied himself with several of the dancers in the company and that they had become fascinated with him. But they had always been fascinated with him.

And at the end of the tour Bob and Steve, who'd been a featured dancer, announced that they were leaving the company. I think Deborah Hay, who was Alex Hay's wife, also left the company. It looked as though the Cunningham Company was disintegrating. It wasn't. Merce reconstituted it later.

But it was a very bad moment. And so that was really the end of Bob's relationship, which had been a very important relationship. His relationship with John Cage and Merce Cunningham had been absolutely central to his whole development, much more than his relationship with any other artist. I think it was probably inevitable because as he became increasingly sure of himself

and famous, there was bound to be conflict. He wasn't going to go on being the loyal supporter of the greater talent, Merce. It was probably inevitable but it was very, very painful for John and for Merce and for Bob. I think it was a great loss to all three of them.

Q: Yes. We have some marvelous conversations about their relationship in the collection. It's been really exciting.

Tomkins: And Cage, talking about the days before the split, said, "I always had the feeling I didn't need to have any other friends."

Q: That's beautiful. They had their own world. Forget Cedar bar. They had their own.

Tomkins: It was a complete creative unit. But I think this was a factor in Bob's decision to leave New York too. He had lost something very important. And I think he felt that he had to go somewhere else. That wasn't exactly true because part of his idea when he moved to Florida was that he would buy this place and the Cunningham Company could come there in their off-seasons and the dancers could practice there in the winter. I'm a little confused about the chronology. That never happened. But I know that was one of the things when he first started out traveling down the East Coast of the U.S. looking for a place where he might want to live, that that was one of his ideas. He wanted to find a place where the Cunningham Company could come and rest and practice and rehearse.

Q: Did moving to Captiva [Florida] take away some of his vitality in his work, do you think?

How do you analyze that?

Tomkins: I don't think it took away vitality, but it really changed him. There is a major change in the work he did after moving there. He used to complain about it. He used to say, "Not much washes up on the beach here."

Q: That's a great statement.

Tomkins: Yes. In New York, you could always walk around the block and find something discarded, an automobile tire or something you could lug back and put in a painting. But, yes. I think the work becomes very different and he never again collaborates with other artists in the way he collaborated with John and Merce. For Bob the whole idea of collaboration was just central. He spoke of himself as collaborating with materials. He didn't want to use materials to—how did he put it? He didn't want to make materials—the materials he was working with—do something that he wanted. He wanted to collaborate with the materials so they could realize their own qualities.

Q: Like finding the goat?

Tomkins: Yes. But he thought of himself as a collaborator with materials and with other artists. And after he left New York, he didn't have that. He had his boyfriends who would come with

him and they were artists. But it wasn't a collaboration in that sense anymore. I don't think he ever had another.

I've never really thought about this but the whole idea of collaboration is so important to Bob and what he had with Merce and John was so fulfilling that you can wonder a little bit if something went out of his own work when that kind of shared energy was no longer available to him. He kept trying to get it. In the ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] tour [1985–91], he would go to these countries and get local artists to work with him and then there'd be a joint show at the end when he was leaving. But it wasn't the same. He wasn't really collaborating with them.

Q: One of the other themes you wrote about is how his art became more allied with political interest or energy. And you felt that the art world at that time was resistant to that idea and that it hurt his reputation. Do you still feel that way?

Tomkins: Yes. Another thing that always impressed me about Bob was that he thought of himself as a reporter.

Q: And I ask on those lines if you could talk a bit about his self-identification as a photographer at a certain point too.

Tomkins: Yes. Yes. That's why photography was so important to him because it was a way of reporting on all sorts of things—on the state of things. It was never entirely satisfying in itself

because he wanted to work with his hands. He wanted to have something tangible to work with and I don't think that a photograph had that quality for him. He was a wonderful photographer, but I don't think the actual taking of pictures was enough to satisfy him.

But it definitely was part of this idea that he saw himself as a reporter on contemporary life in all its manifestations.

Q: And world events.

Tomkins: Yes. On the news you saw in a paper, the whole thing of Cape Canaveral [Florida]. His use of the JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] image in at least four major paintings. He was, I would say, more than any other artist of his generation, he was really primarily interested in giving a picture of the world around him. And that of course was one of the great dividing lines between the AbEx people and the people who came later. The AbEx people were looking inward into their psyches and their emotions and mystical feelings, and Bob was looking out at the world around him.



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

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Yes. So, since we had a break, I had meant to ask you earlier to talk a bit about his reception in Europe when he first went off in the mid-fifties and what people thought of him there and how Italy and France may have responded to him and how he responded to seeing all that art.

Tomkins: Yes. I don't really know much about that. He went with Cy Twombly and I don't think he was terribly interested in discovering Europe. I don't think he met any artists there. No, his impact on Europe didn't happen until the sixties and really not until '64. But the time he spent in Rome, it was very brief, and then he went down to North Africa and worked for that construction company for a while. And then Cy Twombly came down and met him and they traveled a bit and went to Morocco [note: Rauschenberg and Twombly were in Rome and North Africa from August 1952 through April 1953].

But I never had the sense that he was really interested in his surroundings there. He did do those fascinating, primitive works, boxes with the stones and little things in them, a feather and a stone [Scatole Personali, 1952–53]. Sort of a wonderful, isolated body of work that didn't seem to relate to anything particularly in his surroundings.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Untitled (Scatole Personali)*, ca. 1952  
Wood washboard with tricycle wheel, squareheaded iron spike, metal parts, key, copper wire, ribbon, rope, nails, glass shard, seashell, walnut, and feathers  
29 x 14 x 2 inches (73.7 x 35.6 x 5.1 cm)  
Collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim

I don't have a clear idea of him at that period.

Q: That's okay. Just a little bit of a follow-up question on the '64 period then. If you could give me some context about why you think his work was chosen to win the first award by an American and his impact at that time and what people were thinking about in Europe at that time and why he made a big hit there.

Tomkins: Yes. He had had one or maybe two shows with Ileana Sonnabend in Paris. And the younger European artists, a French and Italian, were very struck by the work. It was a revelation to them. They hadn't been aware of it. They were just enormously impressed.

And so when he came for the Biennale, there was great excitement, particularly among the younger Italian artists. The younger Italian artists all wanted him to win. They thought he was absolutely the most important artist of their generation. And there was some chauvinism also because they were tired of seeing the School of Paris people win year after year, one School of Paris master after another. They all felt that the School of Paris was over, that that whole immediate post-war art was dead. They were looking for something new and a lot of them seemed to think that Rauschenberg was that thing—was what they were looking for.

So there was already a wave of enthusiasm for him among the artist community. Alan [R.] Solomon, who directed the show at the U.S. Pavilion, was determined that Rauschenberg was going to win. He had set this as his goal. He definitely felt Rauschenberg was the most important of the younger artists and he rounded up quite a bit of support among the other judges. There were seven judges. He was the only American. I think preliminary polls showed they were four to three for Rauschenberg.

So Rauschenberg was sort of on the way to being a shoo-in. But then this problem arose, sort of a bureaucratic problem, that Solomon had hung most of the Rauschenberg paintings in the American embassy. Because he had come to Venice taken one look at the U.S. Pavilion in the

Giardini [della Biennale] and decided it was impossible. It was too small and too fussy. It was ridiculous.

And so he went around asking the people on the committee, the president of the committee, if he could show Rauschenberg's work offsite in some other place because he'd heard that this had been done. He was told it would be all right. And he had found this perfect setting. America had closed its embassy. It was a cost-saving thing. But it was a very beautiful building right on the Grand Canal, right next to the Peggy Guggenheim palazzo. It was empty. It had rooms on the Grand Canal. And he thought it would be a perfect setting.

So he'd gotten permission. We were all set. He put something like eighteen Rauschenbergs in the embassy. And then at the last minute he was told that yes, it was all right to show Rauschenberg outside of the Giardini, but they wouldn't be eligible for a prize. They had to be on the site to be eligible for a prize, so this was a huge crisis. An enormous amount of jockeying for position went on. And it ended the night before the judging when four Rauschenberg paintings were moved from the embassy—and rehung in the U.S. Pavilion. [Note: Three Rauschenberg paintings were moved from the embassy to join the one Rauschenberg painting originally hung in the pavilion.]

That was it. He won by acclamation. I think every judge voted for him. There was just no doubt that a crescendo of enthusiasm had been building up for Rauschenberg. So it was not a surprise to the people there. It was a great surprise here and a great surprise to the art crowd in Paris, but it was not a surprise in Italy at all.

Q: You've written several times that he's the greatest and most influential artist of his generation. Some of that you wrote in 1980. I wonder how you feel now about that—does your opinion remain the same that he is one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century post-war?

Tomkins: Yes, I certainly do. His later work has had less impact. You can almost date it from the move to Captiva. And you can think of lots of reasons why maybe it's not as innovative, but all through, even into his last years, he produced so much work that it couldn't all be on the highest level. Work just poured out of him all his life and never stopped. And yet even in his later years for every period in his life, there were at least two or three absolutely marvelous works of art.

Q: What are your favorites?

Tomkins: I'm not good at remembering names.

Q: Okay.

Tomkins: There was a particular painting I'm thinking of, *Rodeo Palace* [(*Spread*), 1976]. And that whole evanescent series of *Jammers* [1975–76] with colored silks. They seemed so perfect. They look insubstantial, but there's something unforgettable about them.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Rodeo Palace (Spread)*, 1976  
Solvent transfer, pencil, and ink on fabric and cardboard, with wood doors, fabric, metal, rope, and pillow, mounted on foam core and redwood  
144 x 192 x 5 1/2 inches (365.8 x 487.7 x 14 cm)  
Collection of Lyn and Norman Lear, Los Angeles



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Pilot (Jammer)*, 1975  
Sewn fabric, rattan pole, and string  
81 x 85 x 39 inches (205.7 x 215.9 x 99.1 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

I think in every period, he did work that is as good or better than what almost anybody else was doing. Jasper Johns is of equal importance. Maybe in the long run Johns will be judged the greater artist. But on the point of influence and continuing to convey the spirit of this country, I don't think there's anybody who has touched Bob before or since.

Q: Beautiful. Did you stay in touch with him over time?

Tomkins: Yes. Not consistently, but we'd see each other. I would go down to Captiva now and then and I'd see him when he'd come up here. Yes, we stayed in touch. He was irresistible.

Q: What was his influence on your thinking and your career in writing on art?

Tomkins: Well, as I said in the beginning, it was just a revelation to see how little I had understood about what art is or how artists work. And the idea of the freedom and the nerve, or sort of the unbeatable originality of what comes out of him. The idea that it is not self-expression—well it is, in a way, because no Rauschenberg looks like the work of any other painter. And so there is self-expression. But it's not in the way of autobiography or of his feelings. He's expressing his fascination with the world around him.

Q: Do you have any parting thoughts or reflections on him that you would like to give?

Tomkins: I certainly miss him.

Q: Maybe you could talk a bit about his generosity, his philanthropy.

Tomkins: Yes. He had this foundation, which typically was an original idea. He established this personal foundation, which would give immediate funds to artists who were in need or artists who had a medical emergency or had bad luck and were way in debt or something. He established this fund called Change [Inc. in 1970] and you could just apply. And if the funding was approved, it would come right away, the next week. There was no waiting. This was such an interesting idea because when people need things is right away. It was a typically Rauschenbergian idea.

Q: But you must have seen that anyway, hanging out with him, that he was very generous.

Tomkins: Yes. He could also be ungenerous. He was very contradictory. Everything you could say about him, you could say the opposite. But in general, yes. He was just so great to be with because his mind was so active. It never relaxed. And I used to think sometimes that the reason he drank so much was to keep him from being too far ahead of the rest of us. Just slow him down a little bit. It was just an extraordinary mind.

The generosity was really in the work as well as in things like the foundation. There was an extraordinary generosity in everything he did.

Q: Thank you for your generosity today.

Tomkins: I don't feel as though I've done him justice, but—

Q: I believe you have. Thank you.

Tomkins: In some ways I think I learned a lot about how to write from watching Bob work. That you trust the process. That you don't have to think it out beforehand. You don't have to know where you're going. You just have to trust the process. And that's an extraordinary lesson. I didn't know that beforehand. I thought you had to have it pretty well planned out and proceed from one step to the next. He didn't work that way. He could plunge in anywhere and go backwards and forwards at the same time.

Q: Wow. I wish I'd met him, but I feel like I have. Thank you so much.

Tomkins: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]