

RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

David White

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2013

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with David White conducted by James McElhinney on July 23, July 31, August 1, and August 14, 2013. This interview is part of the Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

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

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Transcriber: 3PM

Session #1

Interviewee: David White

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: James McElhinney

Date: July 23, 2013

Q: This is James McElhinney speaking with David White at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, 381 Lafayette Street in New York City, on Tuesday, July 23, 2013. Good morning.

White: Good morning.

Q: Kind of you to meet with us. When we were coming up in the elevator I shared with you that I had read the interview you did in 2009 with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [SFMOMA], which you shared was held in a conservation lab. Here we are in another room. Can you tell us what this room was in the past?

White: Well, this building was formerly an orphanage, which was empty when Rauschenberg bought it. The top floor was used for many years by an assistant of his named [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi]. When Bob was making art here, Sachika was a studio assistant. And then Bob bought property in Captiva, Florida and moved there, keeping this building, but moved his art-making to Florida and the studio setup was there. Sachika stayed on in this building as the caretaker for the building and he lived on this floor.



Southern façade of Rauschenberg's Lafayette Street studio, New York, showing sign for Saint Joseph's Union, the building's original owners. Date and photographer unknown. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: And worked here as well?

White: Yes, he was an artist himself, so he made his own art and then was responsible for the care of the building.

Q: So he was, in effect, the majordomo of this establishment?

White: Right.

Q: I was reading also that when Bob Rauschenberg was making art in Florida he was concerned about the humidity or the weather and a body of work might be then transported from there to here for safekeeping. So would it have also been the responsibility of Mr. Takahashi to handle those affairs, or was there a—

White: No, he was not really involved in that part. I was curator for Rauschenberg since 1980 and Thomas Buehler who is the senior collections manager also was involved. We worked out of this building. And so we, and the rest of the staff, would be responsible, when a truck was coming up, to make sure it was received and stored here.

Q: And how often might that occur?

White: There was not a kind of regular schedule. It had to do more with when there was a truckload's worth of artwork. The property in Florida is on this island, Captiva Island, which is about an inch above sea level on the Gulf of Mexico. So it's very vulnerable for possible hurricanes, besides being extremely hot and humid. So particularly if there was finished artwork and it was getting to be hurricane season, he thought it would be a good time for a truck to come north.

Q: I noticed in the interview, too, that you spent some time as a child there, in Florida?

White: I was born in St. Petersburg.

Q: Oh, you were born in St. Petersburg?

White: My parents were from New Jersey and they thought they were tired of winter and they decided to go live in Florida, but they were there only a couple of years, long enough for my

older brother and me to be born. And then they moved north before I was even a year old. So I have no recollection of Florida.

Q: What did your parents do?

White: My father was in the advertising business, I think, at that time.

Q: What attracted him to Florida? Work?

White: I think, from what I understand, they thought it would just be nice to be in warmer weather. But then when they got there, they missed winter and the change of seasons, so they then came back to suburban New Jersey.

Q: What town, if I may ask?

White: Ridgewood, New Jersey.

Q: Ridgewood? So not far away at all.

White: They were across the river. Although that was until 1952 when they moved to Cape Cod [Massachusetts], which was a nice place to move from New Jersey.

Q: Interesting evolution. So your dad started out in New Jersey.

White: Both my parents' families had been in New Jersey for a number of generations.

Q: And they moved to Florida, then moved back. How old were you when they moved to Cape Cod?

White: Twelve years old.

Q: So that must have been a wonderful change.

White: Oh, I loved it, yes.

Q: Do you still like to go there? Do you have any attachments to the place?

White: Oh, yes. Both parents have died at this point, but I have friends and former schoolmates and other friends, so I go once or twice a year to visit the Cape.

Q: When you were a child, what was the first moment that you were mindful of being in the presence of a work of art?

White: I don't have a recollection of that kind of a—

Q: Did you go to museums when you were a child?

White: I don't even remember doing that so much. My mother was interested in music, and so she took me and my brother to concerts often. I remember being quite young and going. My brother took piano lessons, and I think she was hopeful that he might be a pianist.

Q: So did she have a professional calling?

White: No. She was a housewife.

Q: And your dad was in advertising?

White: Well then after New Jersey, he left the advertising business. The company was moving to New York City from New Jersey and he did not want to commute. So that's when we moved and he decided he would paint watercolor paintings to sell to tourists. So that's what he did.

Q: In Cape Cod?

White: Although it's hard to make a living doing that. So then he worked for the weekly newspaper in Orleans, Cape Cod called the *Cape Codder*.

Q: So your home was in Orleans?

White: North Eastham, just, I went to Orleans High School.

Q: Very good.

White: Are you familiar with the Cape?

Q: I am a bit. I am a bit. So Eastham's on the sort of arm. It's above the elbow.

White: Exactly.

Q: Lovely place. Lovely place.

White: Luckily, so much of it became National Seashore.

Q: Luckily, yes. Otherwise it would be covered with the horrors that we see in many other places that will have to go unnamed but like Assateague Island [off the coast of Maryland and Virginia] would be like a comparable—

White: I don't know where that is.

Q: Virginia. Sort of National Seashore, sort of unspoiled coastline. Very beautiful. I guess I was asking what your earliest encounter with a work of art was because I know you went to RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence].

White: Right, and even prior to that, when I still lived in New Jersey, which had to be then, before age twelve, since my father was interested in doing watercolors on an amateur level. But I did go to some art classes maybe on Saturday mornings in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

Q: Oh, in Ridgewood?

White: Yes.

Q: Did you ever come into the city to study at the Art Students League [New York] or any place like that—

White: No.

Q: Just stayed out in New Jersey?

White: But after we moved to Cape Cod, there was a program at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and I don't know how one got to go, if anyone could go, or if you had to be chosen. I remember going on Saturdays for a while. It was a bit of a trek for me, up to Boston.

Q: Youth classes and pre-college classes?

White: Yes, it was some sort of Saturday art.

Q: What kind of art were you making at that time, in your teenage years, in your high school years?

White: Drawing and I guess I wasn't sure what direction I wanted my artistic inclinations to go in, so I wasn't—I think I had paints and occasionally did all of them. But I wasn't a focused would-be artist that spent a lot of time.

Q: It wasn't the fire in the belly and you were going to do it no matter what?

White: Exactly. Correct.

Q: And your dad doing watercolors for the tourist market, presumably they would have been like, local scenes or maritime scenes, that kind of thing?

White: Yes. He had been in the Merchant Marines, so he was very knowledgeable about rigging on ships and the windjammers and so he did paintings of historical ships with absolutely precise rigging and mast alignment.

Q: And he had some success with that?

White: Minor success. It was not really enough to support a family.

Q: And apart from his work, what kind of artwork was in your home?

White: There were some reproductions of other marine artwork that my father had bought. I think there was a painting of a bouquet of flowers that my grandmother had done.

Q: So when you would go to the Boston museum school [School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston], presumably you would go to the museum as well?

White: You know, it might have even been more about looking at stuff than classes.

Q: You mean walking in the galleries of the museum?

White: Right, right.

Q: Have you still any favorite works of art in the Boston museum? When you go there, or when you went there, was there anything that knocked you out?

White: Not that I can say, “Oh I always ran back to take a look at—this or that.”

Q: Just absorbing it all?

White: Yes.

Q: So you go to RISD after high school.

White: Yes.

Q: Was that immediately after high school?

White: Yes.

Q: So your college experience was at Rhode Island School of Design in Providence?

White: Correct.

Q: And you studied interior architecture?

White: That's what it was called, yes.

Q: Tell us a little about interior architecture.

White: It was a funny thing where you didn't have the mathematics or the engineering courses that were necessary to be an architect. The freshman year was the same for all of the RISD students. You had basic life drawing and nature drawing and lettering—

Q: Color?

White: Color theory. Then when it got into the specifics of interior architecture, I think it had to do with courses about space and 3D design. Then the senior year, there was something called the European Honors Program, which was the second year of a program that RISD had developed where you could be in Italy for your senior year. So I was lucky enough to get to go there.

Q: Where were you in Italy?

White: In Rome. You had a choice of Rome, Florence, or Venice, and I was in Rome.

Q: Did RISD have some kind of a campus there?

White: They rented a building, a small villa on the outskirts of Rome. They've since had a more impressive place. It's a program that still exists.

Q: Right. I know the Tyler School of Art [at Temple University, Philadelphia] has a place actually in the city, and a few other American schools, as well.

White: Now they're in Villa Cenci or Palazzo Cenci. I've never been to that space.

Q: So that was for one year?

White: The senior year, yes.

Q: How did being in Rome change the kid from Cape Cod?

White: Of course, even from Cape Cod going to Providence, and then from Providence to Rome, it was just wonderful steps. In retrospect I feel like I could have seen much more and done much more, but I loved it. There were, I think, maybe ten or a dozen of us. It was a small group.

Q: Very small program. And the housing was right there?

White: We started out, the first month or so, being assigned to families that agreed to take in people. You had a little immersion in Italian culture and language. We had taken a year or two of Italian at Brown [University, Providence], just up the hill from RISD.

Q: So you had classroom Italian, and so you arrived in Rome and were quartered with a family who would basically teach you how to be Italian for a year, or how to communicate.

White: The family I was with, as a way of making money, took in a number of people. So there were four or five of us from different situations. I think the boat arrived in Naples at whatever time, and then by the time we got the luggage and got on a bus and went to Rome, it was getting toward late in the day and you were just dropped off in front of this house and said, here's your family.

Q: And what did they do other than host students? Was that their career?

White: The mother packaged some lunch for you to take off to class with you. I remember her saying—this is all in Italian—don't talk about [Fidel] Castro! Because one of the other people at the table was somehow connected.

Q: Oh, lots of communists in Italy at that time. So what year would that have been? Would that have been early sixties?

White: That was in 1961.

Q: No, we wouldn't want to be talking about Castro in 1961.

White: Graduated in '62.

Q: And you were there for only a month, in this household?

White: A month, seems like that. And then one could make whatever arrangements one wanted to. So with one other student, we found an apartment not far from the school and just rented it.

Q: What was the thing about coming to Italy and being immersed in the household that surprised you the most? I mean, having come from Providence and having taken Italian in a classroom, assuming in a language lab with headphones and repeating phrases, and then being tossed into this environment where people are speaking in the local argot and slang. What surprised you about how Italians conducted themselves?

White: Everything is so new and strange about a foreign culture for a kid. And the main meal was at lunchtime. We often didn't go home, but sometimes on weekends, and of course there is this main meal, and then the father of the household would get in his pajamas to go take his siesta. That always seemed like a surprise. Just the way the doorknobs work, and the money. It was all surprising and new and wonderful.

Q: Well there are a lot of Italians in Providence, to be sure. Colorful, as I remember, colorful Mayor [Vincent Albert "Buddy"] Cianci. He was later. But then when you left this Italian household, can you recall the name of the family?

White: Oh, dear. I can't at the moment. They were perfectly nice, but we didn't bond for a lifelong friendship.

Q: No, they were just your introductory, transition experience from the U.S. to a year in Italy.

White: Exactly.

Q: And the apartment you found was near the school?

White: Yes. Past Trastevere section of Italy.

Q: Oh, Trastevere, yes. That's a very—still, it's—

White: Well, it was further out. Circonvallazione Gianicolense.

Q: You want to repeat that?

White: Circonvallazione Gianicolense. It's out past the Porta Portese and the—

Q: Circonvallazione Gianicolense. Yes. So out near the peripheral road?

White: Right.

Q: Yes. So who was your apartment mate?

White: Just another RISD student, his name was David Luce that had been in the same situation, living with the family. I think the notion was that family setup was only for a certain length of time, and then one was required to make another arrangement.

Q: So how did you find an apartment, being sort of overwhelmed by the strange—

White: Well, I don't know. I don't know if that was the school probably helping some way.

Q: Had a housing program?

White: They had a list or something like that. It was all new for RISD as well. It was just their second year of the program.

Q: Who were the teachers there? Do you recall?

White: There were two teachers from RISD in Providence who came with us with their wives. I forget their names at the moment.

Q: It could be researched.

White: Oh sure, yes.

Q: Yes. So you were there for the entire year?

White: Well, the school year.

Q: The school year.

White: I think it was over in April. Whenever Easter was, because I remember going north, to be in Florence for Easter and then heading to Greece.

Q: And when school ended, did you then travel in Europe?

White: I didn't come back for graduation, but went up to Venice and then through Yugoslavia to Greece for a bit. And I eventually came back during the summer. It was wonderful.

Q: Anything about that trip you want to share? Your exploration of Florence, Venice?

White: It was all new and exciting. And there were some other RISD students both in Florence and Venice, and I think through these students that I knew from Providence who were in Venice, I met two American girls who had a Volkswagen Beetle, and they were driving through Yugoslavia to Greece. They were happy to have another passenger in the car to help pay for the gas. It seemed pretty primitive at the time. They said they had a way of dealing with any situation. They'd either cry, faint, or vomit, and that took care of everything.

[Laughter]

Q: When you went to Venice, was it a Biennale year or not?

White: That I don't recall. It was April. I don't know—

Q: Oh, April.

White: It was early.

Q: Early, yes.

White: I didn't spend that much time there, which one could have, of course, spent the rest of one's—

Q: You'd have to leave the Beetle in Mestre, I guess and take the train over. You couldn't take the Beetle over. Well, I guess you could take the Beetle over.

White: Well I don't know where they had their car, but we parted ways before we got to Athens.

Q: So were you drawing or were you doing anything, keeping a journal?

White: I was keeping a journal and making little sketches and making notes of what I ate. And I went to some of those Greek islands.

Q: So it must have been wonderful?

White: Oh, it was completely.

Q: There was, years ago, I remember there was a school, an Aegean School of Art. I don't know, that's not still running. But just speaking reminds me of that, that they had some connection, I think, either to Tyler, or MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore] or to RISD, or a number of those, Pratt [Institute, New York] perhaps.

So you got back to Providence? Or you went back to Cape Cod?

White: Back to Cape Cod.

Q: North Eastham. And then what?

White: Well, then I was a waiter for the rest of the summer at a restaurant on Cape Cod. And then in, I think, October of 1962 I got on the bus and moved to New York.

Q: And how'd you organize that?

White: I always loved New York, and loved the idea. I mean, I loved Cape Cod, but it's not a place I wanted to live as a twenty-one-year-old.

Q: I remember speaking to Will Barnet, who described his arrival in New York as in a snowstorm. And he had an address, and the address was for this guy pretending to be a Russian named Arshile Gorky and he slept on the floor.

White: How fabulous. Great.

Q: And he slept on the floor and that was his introduction to New York. So you just got on the bus with a suitcase and moved to New York?

White: I had made friends with somebody, during the course of the summer when I was still on Cape Cod, who agreed to meet me at Nedick's, or whatever it was called at the corner Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street, and luckily he was there. He had a friend's apartment where we could stay for the weekend, and in the course of the weekend—and he had a car—we drove around and looked for places to rent. By the end of the weekend, I'd rented the tiniest room you ever laid eyes on, on Beekman Place.

Q: Beekman Place?

White: Yes.

Q: Stylish address.

White: I know it is. We went to Hell's Kitchen and all over, and then got discouraged. And toward the end, he said, well I'll show you where the other half lives. And we went there and there was a sign out saying, Room for Rent.

Q: The Auntie Mame, the landlord?

White: Yes, fifty dollars a month.

Q: Wow. How long did you stay there?

White: Well, less than a year. I mean it really was a room where you went down a flight of stairs to go to the toilet. And there was no kitchen. So then I found another place. But it was a start.

Q: So how did you occupy yourself that first year in New York?

White: I got a job right away, in a camera store, for starters, I think. But then through a classmate at RISD, David Whitney, who had gotten a job at [Leo] Castelli Gallery [New York], someone else was leaving and he said, “Hey, you want a job at Castelli?”

Q: That would have been 1963?

White: Well actually, it was '65 that I started, so I must have done—

Q: Knocked about a bit, and, yes. So were you making art or trying to practice interior architecture?

White: Actually, I was making some sculpture early on.

Q: In your tiny room?

White: Well, I had moved to another place that was a little bigger.

Q: And what kind of work was that?

White: Oh, I made small things out of wax, and then some larger things of human size out of Styrofoam that were put together and coated with plaster.

Q: That was quite popular once upon a time, Styrofoam and plaster.

White: It was the light, cheap, armature.

Q: Well yes, people were dumpster diving. You spoke about how Rauschenberg would confine himself to scavenging a block, and just impose a rigor on himself like he was going to scavenge stuff for his work. But he would define a particular area.

White: So turn it into gameplay, a little bit.

Q: Yes, and turn it into gameplay. But I think there even is, now, a club or an organization called Dumpster Divers of America, or something.

So David Whitney, who later on opens his own gallery, invites you to come to work for Leo Castelli. What did the gallery, at that time, look like? What did it consist of? It must've been a heady period.

White: It was the building at 4 East Seventy-seventh Street that Leo's ex-wife, Ileana [Sonnabend]'s father had given to Ileana and Leo maybe as a wedding present. I'm not sure. And

at that point, the gallery was one flight up, on the second floor. Leo and Ileana were already divorced at that point, and Leo had remarried Antoinette (Toiny). They had this wonderful roster: Rauschenberg, [Jasper] Johns, [Andy] Warhol, [Frank] Stella, the bunch of them. So it was a wonderful place to work.

Q: So what was your job there, basically?

White: When I first went there, I was pretty much the janitor and David Whitney's helper. I think I started half an hour before the rest of the people started so I get the waste baskets and the ashtrays emptied and the place cleaned up. And then David was the registrar, I guess. I don't know how official titles were. So then I helped him. If he said, "Let's go down and reorganize this room in the basement" or whatever, I helped. In those days, for the mailers for exhibitions, they had one of those addressograph machines that stamped the addresses on the envelopes and put the stamps on. That was in the basement, so there's a desk with *Canyon* [1959] hanging on the wall. And I sat there and got the mailers ready to go out. But the most fun, of course, was helping to install exhibitions, which changed about once a month.



Robert Rauschenberg

Canyon, 1959

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

Q: How did you find yourself interacting with the artists? Did you find that a number of the artists were more open to banter with the people that worked in the gallery?

White: For the most part, they seemed very friendly and open. They were young-ish themselves at that time, and we were there to help them in any way. David particularly got to be quite very friendly with most of the artists. And then I, as well. Some I saw less because they just were around less. Cy Twombly lived in Italy and was not there so much.

Q: Any particular anecdotes about working with any of those artists? What was the funniest joke ever told by Jasper Johns in your presence?

White: Oh, that I wouldn't remember. They were all completely reasonable and nice to work with. I never remember any prima donnas, stamp footing, demanding situations. Leo was the perfect dealer who just wanted to do anything to help the artists along.

Q: Well, and with a reputation for certain elegance and gentility and refinement.

White: Oh, very much so. They called him the fastest bow in the East. I mean it was strange. He was always very nice to work for, and never picking at me, or at anyone that I was aware of. I just remember once when the collector [Robert C.] Bob Scull was in, and you would think the time that you would want to show that your gallery ran smoothly and stuff, you would be particularly easygoing. He turned to me and said, “David! Is that your coat on the bench?” And of course it was Bob Scull’s vicuna coat. If he’d have taken half a look, he’d have known it wasn’t mine. I thought it was just funny. I don’t know if he was nervous or just wanted the place to be perfect and didn’t want a coat lying around. But, it’s so minor.

Q: It’s a good story, though. But so Leo Castelli was not a person that you actually worked with directly that much? You were working through David?

White: Leo adored David and pretty much let David decide what was the right thing for—was needed to do this or that or go to the store and buy light bulbs or whatever.

Q: So you were there to help David and Leo pretty much delegated certain tasks to him. So you would say he was that kind of a manager? He didn’t micromanage his people. He had confidence in them and gave them—

White: Yes. He worked with Ivan Karp, the gallery director, I guess, that was his official title. And they seemed to have very different personalities.

Q: Extremely.

White: And so they tended to, certain artists, one or the other one was more apt to connect with.

And I sat at a desk next to Ivan, so then that was very entertaining with all his liveliness.

Q: So when did he leave Castelli and start OK Harris [Works of Art, New York]?

White: Oh, dear, I'm so terrible about remembering those kind of—

Q: The late, mid, late sixties?

White: This is easy stuff to look up. [Note: OK Harris was established in October 1969]

Q: They'd have to look it up. Sorry. But so what was he like to work with? Ivan Karp at that point?

White: Again, very easygoing, and just effervescent and ebullient and lively.

Q: Lots of cigars?

White: Lots of cigars. Actually, I wonder, I don't remember him smoking in the gallery so much. I don't know if that's something that Leo didn't want. I don't recall, because I know it was very—

Q: Well that's an interesting question, because I think a lot of people reading the transcription of this interview today would not dream of people smoking in galleries, but they absolutely did.

White: Well there's cigarettes for sure. You know, cigar smoke is such an intense odor and flavor, which I don't find particularly pleasant. So I would think if I was sitting next to someone who was doing it all day long, it would've been somewhat annoying, but I don't remember that.

Q: But people were smoking in the gallery.

White: Oh sure, yes.

Q: Smoking cigarettes. Were you? Were you a smoker?

White: I think I stopped before. I had smoked a bit in college, but I'd stopped by the time I started work there.

Q: So how long did you work with Castelli?

White: I worked for a number of years and then I took a leave. I went to Europe and traveled around for a year. And then I came back at one point and David Whitney had left working there, and so then I was the registrar.

So there were two somewhat separate periods. I don't know if it was as long as five years altogether, or I'd have to ask Kay Bearman, who was the secretary when I worked there, who now works at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York], if she has a—

Q: So it was a relatively small operation at that time? You had how many employees?

White: Well, there was Leo and Kay, and then Ivan and David and myself, and then the bookkeeper, Nancy. Six or seven, then over the years, various other people came. But probably less than ten, I would say.

Q: Ivan and Leo were the only people who were actually dealing with collectors?

White: Yes, although David Whitney was very outgoing and personable and got to be friendly with the Sculls [Robert C. and Ethel Scull] and the Tremaines [Burton G. and Emily Hall Tremaine] and would be invited, in part because he lived with Philip Johnson, but moved around in the fancy circles.

Q: Let's take a quick break and make sure that we caught this.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: During our break we were talking a little bit about the goals of these oral history interviews and trying to create a three-dimensional picture of the milieu of Bob Rauschenberg and people who were involved with him. And you were about to tell us a story regarding a memorial for Leo Castelli.

White: Well that was particularly because you said that [Arnold] Arne Glimcher had said to you—

Q: This is not a quote, but something to the effect that the avant-garde had been murdered by the art market.

White: And then that reminded me of a memorial service for Leo Castelli at Cooper Union where Ivan Karp spoke. He was recounting something, a discussion that he'd had with Leo about sales and commissions and what it should be, and figuring out some percentage that didn't come to his head quickly, what the amount would be. And he said, "Well, ask Arne Glimcher. He'd know." I just thought it was a funny remark.

Q: So when you were working at Castelli, and on the periphery or in conversation with artists and collectors, how many of them were talking about investment value, or—

White: Oh, I don't remember that.

Q: Speculating on someone making a splash down the road, and investing in an artist's—

White: I don't remember those kind of conversations.

Q: —future. Yes, my suspicion is that those kinds of conversations weren't actually going on that much. What were the collectors excited about? What got them in the door?

White: I remember the first show after I'd been hired that I helped David and Ivan with the installation were some [Roy] Lichtenstein ceramic, some sculptures. Some heads of women and some stacks of teacups and things. And the mailers got sent out and then lots of people showed up for openings and, I mean, Roy was an acknowledged artist. And it's funny, when I started working there, I had this feeling, "Oh, I wish I'd been here a few years earlier when it was really exciting," or something like that. Now people come up to me and say, "Oh my goodness, you worked there then?" So it's also a day-to-day job when you're doing it, as much as you like the job.

Q: So you're not pausing in a conversation to go write down a quote or something? You're not self-consciously imagining yourself decades hence at a glass table on the top floor of a building on like Lafayette Street attempting the retrieval of all of this.

White: No, I was not. Somebody at one point gave me a notebook and a pencil and said, “You should be just writing down interesting things that you hear.” And of course, I would have had a lot of interesting things written.

Q: You could have had a memoir of the art world. There are a number of those out there, I suppose. A lot of kiss and tell, I guess, but in a funny way, memoirs can also be very self-serving and I think people are perhaps chary of the undertaking for that reason.

White: I certainly would have felt uncomfortable if somebody, one of the artists I was working with said something and I rushed to write it down. That would’ve—

Q: Fortune cookie kind of commentary. Well, when you weren’t at the gallery, did you go to openings? Were you interested in other art?

White: Oh yes, because there was always announcements of all the other shows coming into the gallery. And between David Whitney and Kay and Ivan, “Oh, there’s this and that coming up,” or “Let’s go to this.” So there was lots of activity. So many Castelli artists were involved in set and costume design for the Merce Cunningham [Dance] Company, so we would often go to those performances.

Q: As a gallery crew, or just on your own?

White: No, not necessarily. Just David and I were very, very close friends up until the time he died, so we went to lots of things together.

Q: So any exhibitions or any artists that you recall from that time that you were especially interested in or knocked out by, blown away by, excited by?

White: Well, I thought the Castelli artists were just this incredibly terrific bunch. So of course then they would—

Q: That was the A List.

White: So then they started having the retrospectives in the late seventies. Because after I worked for Castelli, I worked for David Whitney both when he had a gallery, and also after he gave up his gallery. He was just a freelance curator, but he curated a Johns show [1977–78] for the Whitney Museum [of American Art, New York] and a Twombly show [1979] for the Whitney Museum and was very involved in a Warhol show [1979–80], also at the Whitney. So of course, it's particularly exciting if you're working on a show.

Q: So what would have been your role, let's say, in the Johns show? Talk about the Johns show.

White: We made a scale model of the gallery spaces. And this is all pre-computer days. I made miniature Jasper Johns art works for the entire show.

Q: To scale?

White: This big.

Q: So you had these little tiny paintings that could—

White: Move around and—

Q: And this was before either computers or Velcro, right, so you had to—

White: Yes, now you can push a button and get all that stuff to scale. So I had my little paint pots and the tiny, tiny brushes. It's a good way to get to know the artwork if you—

Q: So were you actually copying his works? Were you trying to reproduce them as closely as you can?

White: Oh yes, I was looking at images of them from books or wherever.

Q: It's a great way to remember them, surely.

White: Yes.

Q: So that must have put your interior architecture training to good use. Did you have to build the model as well?

White: David and I worked on it together. It was just one of those foam core things. But I still don't understand how people can install shows without working with a model first. At least it's the way I think. Will it fit? And what goes where, or whatever.

Q: Well how did exhibitions get installed at Leo Castelli Gallery? Who did the—

White: I think the artists were usually very involved in their own work and said, "I would like this here, or that there."

Q: That's an interesting question, because a lot of curators, I think, would feel that having the artist being involved might offer certain challenges, whereas some people would rather have the artist involved. Perhaps it depends upon the artist and the way they conduct themselves.

White: Yes, actually, with the Johns show at the Whitney Museum, Jasper really stood back and said, "David, that's your territory." And when we first showed him the model with all the little miniature things installed, he removed one drawing and said, "I prefer this not to be in the show." So that was it.

Q: Was any explanation offered?

White: I don't recall him saying why.

Q: He just didn't want that drawing in the show?

White: Right.

Q: Interesting. Who's got that model now? Does it exist?

White: I think the model got dismantled. Actually, Jasper asked if he could have the little miniature art works.

Q: Oh, wonderful.

White: So David gave them to him.

Q: So he's got them somewhere?

White: He's moved a number of times. I don't know if he still has them or not.

Q: It's a funny story, though. It's interesting. So with all of the exhibitions that you were involved in, all the exhibition projects, did you always build models?

White: Yes. Actually there was a Warhol portrait exhibition at the Whitney Museum, where David worked out the checkerboard installation so the edges of one painting would touch the edge of another. So there was always space around each painting, but the paintings covered the wall. So I don't think we necessarily did a whole model once the idea was worked out.

Q: Well the installation concept of hanging the individual pieces in that way. Were they square pieces?

White: Yes, I think they were. Warhol portraits were almost always square.

Q: Always square?

White: They were certainly all square that were chosen for the exhibition. Except in the center of the museum, of the gallery, were to be the very, very largest *Mao* paintings [1973]. I don't know if they're fifteen-feet tall, or twenty. I mean, they were enormous. And he did four of them. And the original notion was to build a four-sided structure with entrances just slightly higher than a person's head, so you walked into this tight entrance area and they were installed on the inside. But one owner wouldn't lend, so it ended up being a triangular shape with just three of these *Mao* paintings inside. They probably have exhibition photographs at the Whitney, I imagine.

Q: Well, value of what you just shared is, someone who's researching this could then know to look in the archives at the Whitney if they wanted to reconstruct this. It's an interesting sort of question, how does one deal with the venue, how does one deal with the artist? How does one

deal with the curator, if it's an independent curator. You were working for David Whitney as an independent curator. So what was your role in these projects, vis-a-vis the artist–venue–curator dynamic. Were you sort of a go-between?

White: I think David basically decided which works he would like included. I think the first major museum show was at the [Art] Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi, which was right on the Gulf Coast that Philip Johnson had designed. And I believe Barbara Rose was to have been the curator, and for some reason, at the last—seemingly at the last moment—it didn't work out. And so David was chosen to be the curator. The show was called *Works in a Series: Johns, Stella, Warhol* [1972]. But David was very close friends of all three of them, and so it's a matter of his choosing which works he wanted to install and then arranging loans from the owners if they were not still in the artists' collections and getting them shipped there and just all that stuff that goes with putting a show together.

Q: It's a huge amount of work. I think a lot of people who haven't worked in the museum world or the gallery world, the art world, haven't the vaguest clue how complicated it all is. It needs to be received, it needs to be signed in, the registrar needs to sign it in, the preparator, conservator, needs to evaluate it and so forth.

In the SFMOMA interview I recall you speaking about how Bob Rauschenberg liked his work to be well lit, and that there were some problems with museum's wanting low light levels for—

White: True.

Q: —archival reasons.

White: Yes, traditionally there are maximum light levels that are considered. I mean, any light is bad, in the long run, on pigments and paper. But the museums have come up with a standard of no more than 50 foot-candles or a 100 foot-candles or whatever the amount is. But Bob didn't necessarily think along those terms. He wanted his work to be seen. And when there was an exhibition of his silkscreen paintings that were done between 1962 and '64, that was done at the Whitney Museum [*Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64, 1990–91*], he went in after it had all been installed and said, "It looks beautiful. Now double the light." And the conservators all gasped. And of course it's quite complicated if they've gotten loans from collectors who have stipulated, "I don't want more than X number of foot-candles on my art work." If you're having a wall with more than one work on it, it's tricky to have the light level jumping up and down.



Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1990–91. Works shown are *Retroactive II* (1963), *Press* (1964), *Retroactive I* (1963), and *Tracer* (1963). Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements

Q: Yes, because most of the time, one would expect that in a gallery the light's going to be uniform. So if you're going to put a piece with those kinds of loan restrictions in a room, you're going to be pretty much stuck with that environment based on that piece.

White: Right. I remember going to an exhibition of drawings from Queen Elizabeth's collection and the Royal Collection. And the light level was very low. So when you first walk in, you think, "I can't see anything." But of course your eyes get used to it. They're intimate works, and you're standing quite close to them. So it's okay, but at first, it's a surprise. When there was a Twombly drawing show, or works on paper at the [State] Hermitage [Museum, Saint Petersburg], I was amazed at how incredibly brightly lit it was. And I'm sure that was Twombly's doing. Like Bob, he just wanted a lot of light on the work, so it looked spectacular.

Q: So you left Castelli, you went to work for David Whitney, who had a gallery, opened a gallery, closed the gallery, became an independent curator. Was he still dealing art as well?

White: It started out as— All of Castelli's artists, or most of them, were involved in printmaking as well. Because there were as many artists in the gallery as there were, there were never chances to exhibit the prints because it was always the more major works that were put on exhibit. So David went to Leo and said, could he open a print gallery and call it Castelli/Whitney. And Leo enthusiastically agreed to this arrangement. But then at the last minute, he said, "Oh my wife Toiny is looking for something to do. How about making her a partner and doing it together?" And their personalities were like oil and water. It didn't work. So after two shows and almost no time at all, David said, "Let's disband this." And so she then ran Castelli Graphics [New York].

David opened David Whitney Gallery [New York] and he didn't want to poach Leo's artists, although he was very, very close friends with a lot of them. I would think a lot of them might have said they would have showed with him. I don't know for sure, because Leo's was the place to show. So David found younger artists and showed their work. But the work sold for very little and, of course there's the same amount of expense whether you're selling an expensive painting or a cheap painting as far as trucking and shipping and storing. So it was a losing business as far as moneymaking. Then when he went out of business, I don't think he was necessarily private dealing anymore.

Q: Migrated into curating shows?

White: Right. And he was a very avid, astute collector, so he bought a lot of stuff. But he was not buying things to turn around and sell.

Q: Not to sell, but obviously buying and selling, I think most collectors do that to an extent.

White: He did a little bit, but very little. If he wanted to upgrade something, he would do that.

But then after he died, there was a major auction at Sotheby's of his collection.

Q: Did he leave anything for a foundation?

White: The work was sold to benefit the [National] Trust for Historic Preservation, which became the owner of the Glass House in New Canaan [Connecticut] after Philip died. So it was

all charity to go to the Glass House. Although he did donate certain artworks too, like all Johns drawings went to the Menil Collection [Houston] for example. And Rauschenberg drawings. And so there were some things he designated, but the rest were auctioned.

Q: So he would loan work, also, to exhibitions?

White: Yes.

Q: Did he ever loan works to exhibitions of which he was a curator?

White: I'm sure he must have, yes, because he had very good examples of things.

Q: So what were the shows that you and he worked on together? The Johns, you spoke of.

White: Well, the Johns and the Twombly and the Warhol portrait show. And that first one that I mentioned at Art Museum of South Texas, that *Works in Series: Johns, Stella, Warhol*. And then there was a second show called *Eight Artists*, which took place at the same museum and then traveled to a museum in Miami [Miami Art Center, 1974].

Q: So apart from working with David Whitney on these exhibitions over a number of years, what else were you doing? Did you ever do any writing?

White: No, I never did write. But then when I worked for David that became a part-time job just because, between shows particularly, we weren't very busy. We worked in New Canaan at the Glass House, working with the sculpture and the painting gallery there and then doing gardening work together, which we both liked. But I think that's the time when I was at Captiva visiting Rauschenberg and he said he was looking for somebody to help organize some of the registry information because they were thinking of putting things on a computer. So I said I could work three days a week for the time I wasn't working for David.

Q: Were you still making your own artwork at that point in time?

White: I think much less. I wasn't. I didn't have a studio set up in an apartment.

Q: So it was not a priority. Well you did say earlier that you didn't have sort of the fire in the belly—

White: And I think I got very involved with these other artists who were just—

Q: Who had a ballistic commitment to what they were doing, yes.

White: And they were so extraordinarily good, I think I found that intimidating, or it didn't inspire me to say, "Oh I want to go home and do that." I loved being involved in their work.

Q: The dealer I interviewed a few years ago shared that the reason he became a dealer was, he realized that he could become a great dealer, but he could never become a great artist.

White: It's that kind of thought, yes.

Q: You just wanted to be great in some way. So you met Rauschenberg as a consequence of being at Captiva?

White: No, actually before, he was one of the Castelli artists.

Q: Oh, of course. I mean, the offer to work for him? I'm sorry.

White: Oh, yes.

Q: The offer to work for him came because you had.

White: I started working for him in 1980, so that was later.

Q: But before that, were you and he friendly?

White: Yes. I'd met him in—I started working at Castelli in 1965, and then he had a show in 1967 [*Robert Rauschenberg: Revolvers*]. It was usually about every two years, the artist would have a show, and the show of works called *Revolvers* [1967]. He was in that period of art and

technology where there were silkscreened images on six-foot or four-foot Plexiglas discs and they sat in motorized cradles with a little box with buttons. You could make the disc go clockwise or counterclockwise and alter the composition of what you were looking at. So I was involved with helping install that show at Castelli. And the artists would often be around the gallery, even if it wasn't their show. They would come to the other artists' shows. Bob was very outgoing and friendly and gregarious and had a lot of parties and lots of dancing and—

Q: Frolic?

White: Frolicking, yes.



Rauschenberg in his Lafayette Street studio with *Revolver VI* (1967), New York, ca. 1967. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Maurice Hogenboom

Q: We spoke during the break about art and technology at that period of time being a very kind of hot topic and the famous exhibition at L.A. [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art; *Art and Technology*, 1971] where artists had collaborated with industry or science to create works of art.

I think [Claes] Oldenburg worked with Disney and he made some comment about how he wanted to work for the Disney people because he wanted to know what kind of people believe mermaids should have breasts but no nipples.

White: That sounds like Disney, doesn't it?

Q: So you would have known Rauschenberg at that time, at the time of that exhibition, but not been working with him directly?

White: I didn't go out to the West Coast for work. I wasn't involved with installing his works other places than at the gallery.

Q: So at that time you would have been working at Castelli?

White: Right.

Q: And then later you worked for Whitney in the seventies.

White: Although at that time I was friendly with Bob, and I was troubled with psoriasis.

Sunshine is the great helper for it so often—

Q: Vitamin D, is it?

White: When Bob had his place in Captiva, I would say, “Can I come down and do some kind of a project in exchange for sitting in the sun.”

Q: Mow your lawn.

White: Yes. And he said, “Fine.” So I’d go to—

Q: So that would have been while you were still at Castelli.

White: Yes. I can’t remember, actually, when the very first time I went to—

Q: Anyway, it sounds as if he was a very hospitable—

White: Completely.

Q: —person with lots of people coming through and visiting. Always new people at the dinner table, that kind of lifestyle which certainly sounds alluring. It’s very hard in New York to do that because everyone has to schedule a lunch date six months in advance.

White: I think hostesses would all throw up their hands because they’d invite him to lunch and he’d show up with six other people. Because he wouldn’t have been upset if somebody else arrived with six other people. He’d just say, “The more the merrier,” kind of thing.

Q: So there was always an entourage?

White: Yes.

Q: So you were there having a sun cure and he happened to comment to you that he needed some help with something?

White: The registry, or getting his records organized to be put on a computer.

Q: He sounds like a tremendously organized person. I remember reading about, and they were alluding to, or you were alluding to, three ring binders. He was assiduous about keeping newspaper clippings and exhibition announcements and correspondence and all that kind of thing. Where does all of that now reside?

White: Well, most of it has been on the fourth floor here in this building where our offices are. It's all just in the process of moving with the renovation, but he was good about keeping all that stuff. He was organized, but he was also slightly haphazard; at later dates it was more formalized.

Q: So what exactly was the task that launched your involvement in his life as a mode of employment?

White: Well, it was to do this stuff of getting organized for a computer, although that didn't happen for years. So there was a person who had worked as a registrar or a helper for Bob, who then left right about the time I started working. So it was organizing a system on paper of storage for the artwork. I mean, Castelli had always had a very organized system, but mine was a year-by-year thing. So if you discovered, at a much later date, an early work, you could tuck it into the end of that year's registry rather than tacking into the end of just one single long list.

Q: Right, right. So how exactly were the records organized? Would there be a single sheet of paper perhaps with a photograph of the piece?

White: No, when I got there, these ring binders already existed with descriptions of the artwork: title, date, dimensions, medium, location. And so we just kept those along. It wasn't until the year 2000 that we finally stopped making entries in the ring binders, because just prior to that we were doing it both in the computer and in the ring binders and it's—

Q: It's redundancy.

White: Yes, and the computer just did it so much faster and clearer.

Q: To what extent were the registration practices used by Bob Rauschenberg, or you, like those used by Castelli?

White: I think that the way they were registered when I started working here, they had the Castelli registry numbers on the pieces. It was a system I'd seen used other places. I didn't invent a system. This idea of just doing a year-by-year thing for each year. You have the date and the period and then you start with one, two, three, four after that. I just renumbered things.

Q: So you created a filing system so it would be like, RR-072313.A1.

White: Well, simpler than that. The first two numbers would just be the numbers of the year. If it was an artwork done in 1958, it would be RR-58.1 and then RR-58.2, although because of computers, we're going to have to change it to 58.001 and .002 so you could get up to 999 works before the computer got complicated.

Q: It is sort of interesting how the thing wants to organize the data in its own way.

White: Yes, you have to go along with what it wants, or you're in trouble.

Q: So then what was the Castelli registration system like?

White: For each artist, it went one, two, three, four, which was fine, actually, because then the later works had the later numbers. It was only years later when earlier works came to light that had not gone through the gallery—if Bob had done something and given it to somebody, and all of a sudden, there's a 1958 work, and it was 1975. So it makes it more difficult to find—

Q: Yes. Apropos to this, is there a catalogue raisonné?

White: Well there are plans. There have been various proposals by people. Bob was so incredibly prolific, that often when people see the vast number of things they would be dealing with, they slink away with their tail between their legs. But it is absolutely one of the things that the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation intends to work on.

Q: Certainly important these days in the wake of all this monkey business with—we know what we're alluding to is sort of mysterious personages in Long Island [New York] and newly discovered masterpieces by canonical American artists and more than once, because I remember a couple years ago, there was another dubious cache of artwork. So the value of a catalogue raisonné is enormous in terms of pre-debunking things that—

White: And just for a scholarly thing, of course.

Q: Of course. That would be the primary reason, but also because the stakes are so high now, and because there's such a motivation by nefarious people to—and certain works of art by artists, including Rauschenberg, wouldn't be difficult to fake.

White: True. What makes the catalogue raisonné a bit more complicated in Bob's case than in some other artists is, he loved to blur the boundaries between what's a painting and what's a sculpture and what's a drawing and what's a print. So one has to decide how—this will certainly be a multi-volume thing when it happens. Do you just do it chronologically and do whatever he

did within a certain time period? Or do you try to decide, this is a painting, and is that piece of fabric hanging on the wall a sculpture, or is it a painting, or is it something other? There's lots of decisions to be made before we—we're in that early decision-making stage.

Q: So do you think because his work is so indifferent to the taxonomies of art objects—because he's challenging the taxonomy or he just doesn't care about making the distinction—that organizing his work in a categorical way becomes challenging? Was that why you decided on using the dates? It makes sense.

White: Oh, well this was pre-thinking about catalogue raisonné. In fact, it's separated where if it's just a date and a period and then the progressive numbers, that was for what was called major works, for either paintings or sculpture. And then there were the date and a D followed by ascending numerals, which were for drawing. And then E for editions, which meant anything from a monotype, which is, there's only a single example, to a thing where he did 3000 copies for the local newspaper. So it was already broken down into these certain categories, but there were overlaps. Bob loved the idea of print editions that had a unique element in each one. So if it's an edition of twenty of the same print, there might be twenty different images in each one of the edition numbers.

Q: So in other words, each piece is unique in some way?

White: In some way, yes.

Q: That's sort of challenging the whole idea of an edition, then.

White: Well, Bob loved all those kinds of things, and if you were told, "This is the way it's done," he would love to think, "Well, is there another way to do it? Can I expand that thought?"

Q: So the idea of an edition of one-of-a-kind objects is sort of nose-pulling, a bit.

White: There's a nice quote of Leo Castelli's widow, Barbara [Bertozzi] Castelli. We were talking about some work where there was some confusion about it, and she said, "I found that if there's not a little confusion connected with it, it's probably not a Rauschenberg." And it really is somewhat the case.

Q: But the confusion, as I think you shared in the SFMOMA interview, was that he wanted to ambush himself every day. He wanted to be surprised. He didn't want to go into the studio knowing what would happen, what he'd be having a look at, at the end of the day.

White: He repeatedly said that if he got too adept at doing something or it came too automatically, then it was time to switch gears and think of something else.

Q: Move on. Did you and he have a lot of conversations about art and aesthetics, philosophy?

White: Actually, not so much. The whole time I worked for him, I was here in New York and he was in Captiva. So we were not around one another.

Q: Except when you needed a sun cure.

White: I would go. Or he would say, “Oh, I have a new body of work. Come down and help get it registered or organized or something.” So I would go a few times a year. Or more often, he would be up here because he was having an exhibition here or going to a friend’s exhibition or on his way to Europe or whatever. But we didn’t really have a lot of sitting down and discussing.



David White and Rauschenberg discussing *Rush 11 (Cloister)* (1980) in Rauschenberg’s print shop, Captiva, Florida, 1980. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Was he inclined to do that with other artists?

White: Probably more so, or with certain people. He was an incredibly fascinating talker when he was talking about anything. And his ideas about art as well, of course.

Q: One imagines that there are people out there who are public intellectuals. Marcel Duchamp certainly was an influence, I would think, in his sense of play and game. But he also exuded this image of being the pipe-smoking brainiac as well with a chessboard. But how would you characterize Bob Rauschenberg intellectually? Was he a big reader? Did he read a lot?

White: No, he had dyslexia, so reading was very difficult for him. It always surprised me that his vocabulary could be as extensive as it was, since whenever I was around him, the TV was always on—the most banal soap operas and game shows and just morning cartoons if you were there in the morning. So it wasn't the Channel Thirteen cultural event. Most of those shows don't have this kind of terrific vocabulary, just in the course of them, and yet he had a very interesting way of saying things.

Q: Well it must have come from verbal interactions at a kind of high level, I would think. They say [Christopher Houston] Kit Carson could speak eighty languages and couldn't read and write. It's possible to be totally verbal and not necessarily be that comfortable with reading and writing. Although illiteracy is a different thing than dyslexia.

White: And Bob loved to write about things, and you should read what he's written about various things. It's fascinating.

Q: I'd imagine that the voice is like the voice with which he spoke. Or was it more literary?

White: Well, yes. Almost more intense in the writing, it seemed. I remember thinking, when I would go to Captiva, if I hadn't been there in a while or been around him, it took a little bit to get in the rhythm of how he was speaking. And you could almost not understand what was being said at first. Not because it was a word you didn't understand, but just—it's hard to explain, but—

Q: The syntax, in particular?

White: Yes, but then when you were around it all, one got more used to it.

Q: I guess one should watch videos of him speaking. But I would imagine that when you put a camera in front of somebody, they're never quite themselves, unless they're performers anyway.

White: I guess that's the case. Bob did seem to be comfortable, for the most part, in public speaking in front of a microphone or a camera. And that SFMOMA, what is it called? Not the website. It's their new catalogue of their Rauschenbergs in their collection [[Rauschenberg Research Project](#)]. They've just gone online, it's an online catalogue. And they've worked on it for four years, but it includes a lot of videos of Bob speaking with other people. And they're wonderful, wonderful things just to listen to and you get a sense of how he spoke and how he responded.

Q: There are outtakes of an interview with a person named Ross, I think—

White: David [A.] Ross, from the museum there.

[Note: unpublished transcript of Rauschenberg video interview by David A. Ross, Walter Hopps, Gary Garrels, and Peter Samis, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999;

http://www.sfmoma.org/assets/documents/research/RRP_SFMOMA_rauschenberg_interview_may_6_1999.pdf]



David Ross, Director, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Rauschenberg 1999. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen

Q: Right. When they interviewed with you from 2009. So they stop the conversation and watch the video, or an excerpt of the video. That's in the transcription of the interview.

[Note: David White interview was conducted by Richard Cándida Smith, Sarah Roberts, Peter Samis, and Jill Sterrett, SFMOMA, 2009;

http://www.sfmoma.org/assets/documents/research/RRP_SFMOMA_75th_anniversary_white.pdf]

Shall we take a break?

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: 3PM

Session #2

Interviewee: David White

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: James McElhinney

Date: July 31, 2013

Q: This is James McElhinney speaking with David White on Wednesday the 31st of July, at the Rauschenberg Foundation's studio building at 381 Lafayette Street, New York City. Good afternoon.

White: Good afternoon.

Q: Last time we met, we spoke about your childhood and generally sketched out a kind of framework for your life up until the time when you came to work for Robert Rauschenberg.

White: Right.

Q: I was wondering if today, perhaps, we could open the interview with how he actually came to ask you to work for him. What day was it? What kind of a day was it? What were you doing?

White: I'd known him for a while, because of working at Castelli Gallery where he showed. But as I said, I periodically went to Captiva, Florida to visit. I was there on a visit, and Rubin [L.] Gorewitz, who was his accountant, was also there. They were discussing the need for getting the archives computerized. Bob said, "Well, who will I get to do this?"

At that point, I really can't remember if I said, "Well, I'm available three days a week," or he turned to me and said, "Oh, would you be available to work on this?" In any case, the subject came up, and I said, "I would be happy to work on this." It was supposed to be a specific project of a specific length of time. That was in 1980.

Q: What was the projected duration of the project?

White: I don't think they ever said. It was just all this written information that they wanted to get—I wasn't necessarily the person that was entering it into the computer system. It was just making sure it was organized and brought up to date. So if one thought about it realistically, one would have known this would be a very long, ongoing project.

Q: So your role, the role he proposed or invited you to assume, was not really technical. It was not secretarial. It was more managerial, that you would organize this transfer of data from—

White: Right. That's how I understood it, yes.

Q: Okay, so it was—

White: Because I had been the registrar at Castelli Gallery. So he knew that it was the kind of work that I was doing, and then took care of keeping track of the artwork.

Q: So he knew you to be a meticulous person, and careful, and that you would provide order to whatever it was that needed to be made more available through the advantages of information technology. So had you any prior experience working with computers? I mean, 1980 is pretty early.

White: No. In fact, it was more getting the records organized in some sort of system so they could go on a computer. I knew nothing, or next to nothing, about computers and was not the person that actually did it.

Q: Was there a person already there who was doing clerical work?

White: There were various people that worked for Bob at the office, here in New York. Charles [“Charlie”] Yoder had, pretty much, the job that I have now as a curatorial—and I think he was the one that wrote out these records in the ring binders. But just around that time, he left. So, in part, it was replacing Charlie to come work here.

Q: Where did he go?

White: He is an artist. And I’m not sure. He worked for Castelli Graphics, I believe, at one point. That might have been following his working here. I’m a little confused about the order of which came first.

Q: In any event, he decided to step away from the office work here at Robert Rauschenberg, Inc. And you came on board. What did you find when you came to work the first day? What did the organization look like? The operation?

White: Well, it was in this building. All along, Bob kept clippings and announcements of his shows. And so they were in boxes. By some standards, it was already really quite organized, rather than all just thrown in a heap. These binders did exist. They just needed a new numbering system to make them more compatible to be on a computer.

Q: So it was you who established the current binder system that we—

White: Well, the system that went from the binders into the—

Q: Into the computers.

White: —computer. And one of the first projects was to do a kind of inventory of all the artwork in the house. Just to make sure it was all included in the registry. That was a big task.

Q: How did you go about that?

White: I think it was just a room-by-room, cabinet-by-cabinet kind of search.

Q: Make a list and just—

White: —see if it already had a registry number. Because once things got registered, there was a number put on the back of it—

Q: Of each piece?

White: —as a way of identifying it. Yes.

Q: That does sound like there was a lot of order here already when you came.

White: Oh, yes, very much so.

Q: So it was just a matter of streamlining it a bit in preparation for entering it into a computer.

White: Right.

Q: So what was the quantity of artwork that you found here, that you had to inventory in this way?

White: Oh, I don't know in numbers. When I look at the bookshelves, I see a thing that's four- or five-feet long, which held the ring binders at that point. And now it's many shelves worth. Over the years, it grew enormously.

Q: But hundreds or thousands or—?

White: Yes, thousands, if you count editioned works of a series of prints and posters, where they can often be an edition of several hundred of just a single image. Then it can get into thousands quickly.

Q: How was the operation here organized when you came in? It was all under Charles Yoder.

White: No. There was a woman, Susan [Lewis], who was in a secretarial capacity. And the man that had been a studio assistant before Bob moved to Florida. Sachika Takahashi lived on the fifth floor and was the caretaker of the house, specifically—made sure the windows were cleaned and all that kind of stuff, receiving and releasing packages.

Q: So he oversaw the operations of the physical plant.

White: Right.

Q: Did he also have any kind of responsibility as a preparator or as a—?

White: He is an artist. Having worked with Bob on some pieces, if there was a question of conservation or about a piece, he was somebody to turn to, to get an answer of how something was made in the past. Or if something needed some restoration, he often helped out with those things.

Q: He would hire the person? Or he would contract the person to do the conservation?

White: I don't think he did so much the hiring. If something—

Q: Or he would do the conservation himself?

White: —he did some himself. Or if somebody needed to be hired, then that was me or the secretary. Thomas Buehler, who is now the senior collections manager, was working here as well. His office, his desk, was here. It's now at the warehouse in Mount Vernon [New York]. [He is] very much involved in keeping track of the art and the art itself, whether it was in the warehouse or being released from the warehouse.

Q: When you were going through the house, room-by-room, and having a look at the artworks in the house, on the wall, leaning up against the wall, in drawers, wherever they were, how did you actually record the artwork? Did you take a photograph of it, like a Polaroid?

White: Yes. A lot of it was, as I said, already registered. But I was giving it a new numbering system if it had what had formerly been the Castelli numbering system.

Q: You explained that last time, too.

White: But if there was something that I discovered that had not been registered yet, then it was photographed, usually informally, just for the time being, and the information put on a registry sheet that got added to the ring binder.

Q: So everything ended up in the ring binder—

White: Yes.

Q: —one way or another.

White: Yes.

Q: I'm just trying to imagine the actual physical activity of doing this. You were walking around with a notebook? Or index cards? Or—?

White: A notebook, I imagine.

Q: Okay, so—

White: One of the first things I did was go to Castelli Gallery and Xeroxed all their registry sheets to make sure that we had everything. My having worked there, Leo trusted me as well. It made it very easy and nice to be able to have access to all his records and Xeroxed all of the invoices of who works got sold to, and the addresses of the collectors.

Q: It seems like, today, you'd really have to twist the arm of a dealer to get that—

White: Oh, yes. [Laughs]

Q: —kind of information out of them. Why do you suppose Leo Castelli was so happy to share that information?

White: He was very much wanting to help the artists, in any way that they proposed, if he could. He was very generous and open.

Q: Well, it's a very rare—

White: Yes.

Q: —seems like a very—

White: Indeed.

Q: —unusual thing. So when you were inventorying the various artworks here at the Rauschenberg residence and studio in New York, did you also evaluate them for conservation purposes? Was that part of it, like when something gets checked into a museum or after a show? There's an inspection and—

White: A condition report, yes.

Q: Yes, thank you. A condition report.

White: Yes, it wasn't done in any kind of official way. But I am sure I would mark in the book: needs attention, or needs repair, or something is falling off, whatever the case might have been. But in addition, since Bob was continually working, there was new work to be added all the time, besides what already existed.

Q: That must have kept you on your toes as well.

White: It was nice that periodically I would get a phone call to come to Captiva because he had just finished a new series of works, which he wanted to get registered. A series that comes to mind was something called *Jammers* [1975–76] which were mainly un-stretched pieces of fabric, often combined with bamboo poles that leaned against a wall. It was very hard even to find a place to make a mark to identify which one was which. But we found we could mark on the bottom of the bamboo poles, the part that rested on the ground. They all had to have a little drawing of what they looked like, and be measured and registered.



Robert Rauschenberg
Roe (Jammer), 1976
Sewn fabric and cloth-covered rattan pole
94 x 59 x 22 inches (238.8 x 149.9 x 55.9 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: In terms of photography, for registration purposes, for ring binder files, you would take some kind of provisional, either Polaroid or snapshot. Would you actually have works photographed professionally?

White: Yes.

Q: Of all of them? Or just select ones?

White: Most of them. Certainly the ones that were consigned to Castelli Gallery for exhibition were professionally photographed, individually and then installation photographs when the shows were installed. But since Bob was a photographer and had a dark room in the studio in Captiva when he was there, there were people who photographed the work in the studio if it wasn't necessarily going to Castelli, just to have a record. But it was more professional

photographs. Although sometimes only black and white, or only a colored slide. Depending on the importance of the work. The smaller drawings sometimes had less attention or even no photography at first.

Q: So there was sort of a triage. You would photograph major works, and then drawings and editions as needed related to exhibitions or publication?

White: Right. We're still catching up on some. Sometimes Bob would do a suite of almost postcard-size drawings to give to friends as Christmas presents or something. They weren't necessarily all photographed at the time they were made and dispersed. So it's a matter of contacting the various people and trying to get them—if there's this notion of a catalogue raisonné where each work is included, including an image of it. Then there's still catch-up work to do.

Q: Was there ever any talk back in those days, in the eighties, about a catalogue raisonné down the road? It must have been inevitable by then. He must have seen the necessity for it.

White: I don't remember specific conversations about it. But I would assume it crossed Bob's mind. He was aware that those things existed for [Pablo] Picasso and other older generation artists.

Q: But he was not, at that point, ready to give up the ghost. Artists who are still active are not pondering the posthumous documents.

White: Right. It was more about today and tomorrow than what he had done yesterday.

Q: That's interesting, because he seems like he conducted himself, in terms of keeping announcements and articles and press clippings and being really assiduous about recordkeeping. That would indicate a personality that was mindful of the future. But he is seen by most people, I think, as someone who was living in the present all the time.

White: It is interesting because, even early on at Black Mountain College [North Carolina], he did quite a few photographs of artwork he was making, even in the course of making it. There'll be pictures of a black painting before it's finished, just pinned up to the façade of the building where the light was good. There really is this sense of recordkeeping and progress of the work coming along.

But at the same time, the story about taking works to Betty Parsons and her saying she would give him a show, and then he went home and painted over half the paintings before the—

[Laughter]

White: —the day of the show. His enthusiasm—



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled [vertical black
painting, early state], 1952

Q: Did he ever talk about his recordkeeping, his scrapbooking, his photographing works in progress?

White: Not so much. But often, if we were installing a show or something interesting was happening, then he'd say, "Oh, I hope someone's photographing this." So he was conscious of wanting records to be kept of what was going on.

Q: Is that because he saw the process of, let's say, hanging a show as being a work of art in itself?

White: It certainly was of interest to him. I think it had to do with—particularly, if there was something visually interesting, like the painting *Monogram* [1955–59] that has a goat on it. If that's being removed from a case, it's a wonderful thing and unusual to look at.



Robert Rauschenberg
Monogram, 1955–59
Combine: oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe heel, and tennis ball on canvas with oil on Angora goat and rubber tire on wood platform mounted on four casters
42 x 63 1/4 x 64 1/2 inches (106.7 x 160.7 x 163.8 cm)
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Purchase 1965 with contribution from Moderna Museets Vänner/The Friends of Moderna Museet

Q: But he never spoke about that, per se? Like—

White: No, we—

Q: —when I was in school, I got this idea. I was looking at *Artnews* and they had “[Henri] Matisse Paints a Painting.” There were these articles where they would show, sequentially, works of art in progress by well-known painters of that time.

White: No, he never seemed to have this agenda that he spoke of that way.

Q: So you came here and found the operation as you did. How did you then inhabit the position? Was Charles Yoder still here? Was there a transition period?

White: Well, I think he had—

Q: —just left.

White: —left, at that point.

Q: And you had known him?

White: Maybe he had worked at Castelli prior to working for Bob. Somebody that I knew from just art world friendships. We're still friends.

Q: But when you were hired, you didn't call him up and say, "Charles let's have lunch?" He left work and you showed up.

White: I think Bob, in effect, fired him. I think. I don't know what the situation was, if there was some specific thing that had distressed Bob or—I think Bob liked Charles very much. And then they remained friends for the rest of Bob's life.

Q: Just, it didn't work out for Charles to be working—

White: I'm not sure how long he was here. It could have been a number of years. But he does pursue his own art-making as well.

Q: Once you got here and you got your legs under you, and you started to get involved with all the various different tasks, what was your number one priority? Was it the renumbering of the works or redesigning—

White: That eventually got done after—I don't know how long that took. But then it was acting as the registrar. Just keeping track of things coming or going. At that point, people would come to Bob and say, "Can we borrow such-and-such an artwork, or group of artworks, for an exhibition?" If Bob agreed then, often, I would be in contact with the gallery, the museum, or whatever. It seemed to just edge up at first because Castelli Gallery handled that kind of thing. People would approach the gallery about including a Rauschenberg. Then Leo would find out if it's something that interested Bob or he approved of. And then they did the paperwork. Although, then they would have to get in touch with me about, "Where is this painting? And can we come pick it up or send somebody to the warehouse?"

Q: The warehouse, you keep referring to the warehouse in Mount Vernon. How did the warehouse chosen come to be one in Mount Vernon?

White: I don't know how many years it's been there at this point, but that's the most recent. Early on, the Rauschenberg works were stored in Hague Warehouse and other warehouse companies. And they just, through Castelli or through Bob, rented out space. As Bob's work accumulated, and his monetary means accumulated, he was able to rent a place on his own. Things were moved out of the commercial warehouse. At one point, it was just across the street on Great Jones Street. That was very convenient to just walk across the street.

Q: When he had a loft over there that he was using as a—

White: It's a two-story building. But then, either he outgrew the—it wasn't a large enough storage space. Then there was another space in the West 30s, near the [Jacob K.] Javits [Convention] Center. That was the space for quite a few years, and Bob had the whole building. But then there was talk of that being torn down or taken over by eminent domain, because of the High Line expansion or something like that. So there was time to look for another warehouse. Rents and selling prices just got higher and higher in Manhattan. Thomas Buehler was very inquisitive and inventive about just looking in other places in Brooklyn and nearby. Eventually, this place was found in Mount Vernon. It's not far from City Island [New York] where Thomas ended up buying a house. In one sense, it seems very far away from here. But it's also quite convenient if Thomas has to go and release a painting or receive a painting because it's not far from where—he works there on a regular basis but it's close—

Q: So he works a lot from home now.

White: Not from home but from Mount Vernon—

Q: From Mount Vernon.

White: —which is close by his home.

Q: Just to get a handle on the physical operation there, you've got a warehouse space and there is an office space there as well?

White: In the warehouse, yes. That's where Thomas's desk is, and computers, and all that kind of stuff.

Q: How large a staff has he?

White: There's a man that he works with, who is his assistant and caretaker of the place. It's basically the two of them. Periodically, we, people from here, go up to help, if a bunch of work has been sent up. In fact, that's the way it is now. There's a whole bunch of stuff that's come up from Captiva recently, that since Bob's death needs to be labeled and checked-in for storage.

Q: So at the moment, the warehouse is being heavily tasked with the traffic from Florida.

White: A combination of that and since there's this renovation work going on here—

Q: Here.

White: —on Lafayette Street, we've taken all the art off the walls and even emptied the flat files. And that all has gone, or is going, to Mount Vernon now.

Q: Apart from the storage and the office, is there also a sort of a conservation lab there? Do you have a studio space for—?

White: There's not really a conservation lab. Although, there's space if conservation work is to be done on something on the premises. There's a large room which is used for either installing work, [or] if someone is coming to look at something in particular, or something is being photographed, or conservation work is being done. Yes, there is space for it. There's not a conservator on staff.

Q: That would be contract work, but you would bring them in, as opposed to sending the work to them.

White: Right. Well, sometimes it gets sent. It depends on the work.

Q: Size?

White: Exactly, yes. Mainly size. If it's a really big—

Q: Because from purely the material culture of Robert Rauschenberg's studio practice, it's all over the shop. I mean, he used everything and anything—

White: Right. [Laughs]

Q: —and not, certainly, adhering to the sage advice of hundreds of years of finger-wagging craftsman saying, “You must always do it this way.” He was a rule breaker and experimenter.

White: [He] very much felt that artworks have their own lives, as well. And they might change over the course of their existence. I remember, particularly, a collector or someone came to him with a collage work that had Scotch tape on the surface of it. That older Scotch tape used to turn kind of an orangey color if it was too old. And the woman said, “Oh surely I can have your permission to replace this with newer transparent tape so it will look like the way the work looked when it left the studio in the first place.” He said no, that he embraced the change that had taken place in the work and was happy to have it stay that way. So that’s kind of unorthodox compared to how other artists might think about it.

Q: Not without precedent. Because if you think about *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, The Large Glass* [1915–23] down in Philadelphia [Philadelphia Museum of Art], which is broken—

White: [Laughs]

Q: —and shattered. And the paint is peeling. The piece is, basically, deteriorating before your eyes. There you could point to an object [whose] maker, obviously, knew was impermanent. Because the methods used were known to be inadequate for purposes of durability.

White: And he accepted, after the glass broke, as being part of—

Q: Yes.

White: —the piece now.

Q: Did Bob Rauschenberg know Marcel Duchamp? Was he—?

White: Yes.

Q: Were they friendly?

White: Yes, I believe so. I believe he and Jasper Johns met Duchamp at the same time. All this stuff is in the chronologies, and so I don't have it in my head. But—

Q: I'm just wondering apropos—

White: But he was, certainly, an influence.

Q: Apropos to talking about conservation and accepting the—love this insurance word—the inherent vice of an object, did he happen to mention, in your earshot, anything about Duchamp or his regard for him apropos to accepting the changing object?

White: [Pauses] I don't remember specific things of that, specifically. But he was friendly with and liked both Duchamp and his wife, [Alexina] Teeny [Sattler Duchamp], and saw them when they could.



Rauschenberg and Teeny Duchamp,
Paris, April 1981. Robert
Rauschenberg papers. Robert
Rauschenberg Foundation Archives,
New York. Photo: Emil Fray

Q: They didn't live right around here. They were further west.

White: When they lived in New York it was on Twelfth Street or something—

Q: Right.

White: —like that.

Q: That's what I meant, in Manhattan—

White: Yes.

Q: [Laughs]—a little further west on the island, near NYU [New York University] and that area.

White: Near Tenth Street.

Q: How long has the warehouse been in operation in Mount Vernon? When did everything leave the Javits—West Thirties?

White: Seven years. Ten years.

Q: But, yes, recently.

White: Recently, yes. But it's probably longer than I [laughs] realize. [Note: The warehouse in Mount Vernon has been in operation since 2007.]

Q: But he was alive at the time that happened.

White: Oh, yes. He was aware of it all. He never did get to see it when it was completed, which he always said he would at some point. And I don't know why that—he was, basically, in Florida. But he was in New York from time to time.

Q: Of course.

White: Had he really been anxious to see it, he could easily have arranged to go there.

Q: But at the end of his life, he was hindered by immobility.

White: At the very end, yes—

Q: At the very end.

White: —but, certainly, the warehouse has been there long enough that—he certainly trusted Thomas and the way it was set up. I think he heard only good reports about it. So maybe he felt he didn't have to. He was completely comfortable with how it was being handled.

Q: Just a little housekeeping, was the timing of the acquisition of the warehouse and Thomas's moving to City Island, at roughly the same time?

White: Yes, I think.

Q: We could pair those events, perhaps.

White: Yes. Maybe Thomas found his place first and then thought, “Well, this makes sense to find a place near where I am just for logistics of getting to and from a place.”

Q: Lovely lower Westchester [County, New York].

White: Yes. [Laughs]

Q: When you accepted Bob's offer to go to work for him here in New York, did you have any reservations at all?

White: No, because actually, I'd known him from Castelli days. I had been working for David Whitney, and then that just became less and less, because it was freelance curating. Often, there were no jobs going on. So I was very happy to have additional income and a job with people I knew and doing stuff I was interested in doing.

Q: Three days a week, too—

White: Right.

Q: —was almost a sinecure when you compare it with the life of a freelance curator. Were there any things, specifically, you were excited about when you accepted the job?

White: I just always loved Bob's work, so just to be around it physically is very satisfying.

Q: I assume you had the sense that you were being handed a task you could sink your teeth into and would occupy you.

White: Oh yes, it looked like a big endeavor.

Q: It wasn't going to be a couple of months' employment.

White: Although there was this notion that it was this specific kind of thing to do. I don't remember thinking, "Oh, I'll turn this into a full-time job," or anything like that. But it just seemed to come about that way.

Q: It just evolved.

White: Yes.

Q: So you were there and—

White: And the work was there. [Laughs]

Q: —the work was there. And the work seems to be ever-increasing—

White: Yes.

Q: —because it was a productive time in his life.

White: I didn't have anything else in mind that I was wanting to do. Or that I said, "Oh, I'll do this for six months and then I'll go do something that I—"

Q: Were any of the people employed here at that time, people you already knew?

White: I probably knew them all because of Bob's being a Castelli artist when I worked there. One often gets to know the people that are working for, and around, and with the artists. If you go to the artist's studio to pick up a work for Castelli, or return a work, or whatever, or phone conversations—I knew them all, I'm sure.

Q: How large a staff was there?

White: Maybe it was only—could have been four of us if it was Sachika and myself, and Thomas, and Susan Lewis.

Q: You all knew each other prior, but you hadn't worked together.

White: Right.

Q: How did that work out? Did you forge a good team? Was everybody working on their own brief? Was there a particular person who was in charge of everything? Was that you?

White: Not necessarily. Susan Lewis was, I guess, the secretary or manned the phones and the mail. It seemed to work, just, very smoothly that she did what she did and I did what I did. We were in the next room. So we worked closely together and had meals together often or socialized.

Q: So she ran the office.

White: Yes.

Q: You were the registrar and archivist. And Thomas was the curator?

White: He's now called collections manager. And it was really his particular involvement with the collection itself, in its handling and whereabouts. So in one sense, it's quite similar to what I do and we work together on a lot of things.

Q: You handle it in a virtual form, right?

White: Maybe more so, yes. [Laughs]

Q: And he's handling it in the physical form.

White: Yes.

Q: So you're handling the records and the archives and the virtual body of work. And he's actually dealing with the stuff itself.

White: Although, then, when we would be installing works, we'd each lift an end of the painting.

Q: I'm just trying to understand, what then was Sachika's role?

White: That was more caretaking the house. So often he wasn't in the office space itself. He's an incredibly good cook. He, quite often would say, I'll make lunch today for everybody, which was a treat because he's such a good cook.

Q: So he was kind of the majordomo with Mr. Takahashi.

White: Sachika Takahashi is his name.

Q: Right. Oh, that was Sachika Takahashi.

White: Yes, that's who was caretaking the house itself.

Q: So he did everything from cooking to handyman to—

White: He'd put on the belt, strap the belt that you hang on the window, and wash the windows from the outside and—

Q: Amazing!

White: Yes. [Laughs]

Q: Wow. That's pretty remarkable. He was up on the roof spreading tar around every so often. And he worked here, where we're conducting this interview. This was his—

White: This was his living quarters but also where he could make his own art, yes.

Q: Was there an elevator at that time?

White: No, Bob put that in. I don't know what year. His mother [Dora C. Rauschenberg] lived in Lafayette, Louisiana. But she would come up and visit from time to time. As she got older and it got harder for her to climb the stairs, he put in the elevator.

Q: So you can't recall the year when it was—you were here at the time.

White: Yes, it was after 1980 sometime. But she lived maybe into her nineties. She drove her car up close to the last years of her life.

Q: He was born in Texas, right?

White: Yes. Port Arthur, Texas.

Q: Port Arthur, Texas, to a very fundamentalist—?

White: Yes. It was depression time and so there was a scramble for money.

Q: Pretty Steinbeck-esque.

White: Yes.

Q: Did you know Mrs. Rauschenberg?

White: Yes, I met her from time [to time]. His father was already dead before I met Bob. He'd died quite some time before.

Q: How were your interactions with her?

White: Oh, she was wonderful. She still called him Milton [laughs] when everyone else called him Bob or Robert. She had such funny, old-fashioned ideas. When he would hang up a fabric piece that looked like a dirty sheet then she'd say, "Oh, what are the neighbors going to say?"

[Laughter]

White: That kind of reaction.

Q: Did she come here often?

White: Not often, but from time to time. Bob would visit her as well.

Q: Lafayette, Louisiana.

White: Which is where his sister lives with her husband.



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

Q: I'm beginning to see the way this operation was working. It seems like it was a very good kind of division of labor, where everybody was working to their own strengths, on their own tasks, in coordination with each other. And everybody got along. What was the first major project that you were involved in outside of—exhibition or publication or—

White: Right in 1980, there was a European tour. In fact, Thomas Buehler was hired just at that time. He's German. The tour started in Berlin and then went to the Louisiana Museum [of Modern Art] in Denmark, and went to the Tate museum [Tate Gallery] in London. When I was hired, that tour was already under way. Thomas and Charlie Yoder would go to the various places and help install all the work. Bob traveled around, at that point, to all of the venues. I went to the last one, the Tate venue. That was one of the first kind of—

Q: So you—

White: —exhibition.

Q: —stepped into your position when there was an exhibition on the road.

White: Yes, so Charlie Yoder, although he stopped working here on a day-to-day basis in the office, was involved with Rauschenberg exhibitions that were traveling around. Even in the late eighties and up into the nineties, the big world tour called **ROCI** [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, 1985–91], Charlie was part of the installation team there, as well.

Q: So he would travel with the work.

White: With Thomas, and sometimes I went as well. I didn't invariably go. They went to every single stop.

Q: So the in-house curatorial team, the traveling exhibition support team, was Yoder, Buehler, and, occasionally, Rauschenberg.

White: Well, Bob Rauschenberg went—

Q: Always.

White: —always. In fact, I think he loved installing shows and was very, very involved. In some cases, like the retrospective in 1976, which was started at the National Collection of Fine Arts [Smithsonian Institution; now Smithsonian American Art Museum] in Washington, D.C., was curated by Walter Hopps, who was a very strong, influential, important curator and is kind of legendary, at this point. But he and Bob seemed to adore one another. I think they worked together on the installation of the show. Walter had very strong ideas. I don't think he would just stand back and say, "Bob, you do it." But I wasn't involved with the curating of that exhibition, so I can't say.



Rauschenberg and Walter Hopps discussing *Minutiae* (1954) during the installation of the retrospective exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg*, National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1976. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni

Q: If Bob Rauschenberg was willing to accept the deterioration of the materials in his work, in the work that he made, was he similarly open to the curators, at a venue where his work was being shown? [To] have a free hand with hanging it? Or was it more of a collaboration?

White: I would think it, probably, was a collaboration. A lot of those earlier shows I was not really involved with, particularly when they were overseas. I think, very often, when there's a living artist, the curator does defer to the artist, or certainly says, "How would you like to see this work," or "Let's discuss," or—I think Bob was, certainly, open to listening to other thoughts but he was very clear.

I remember the catalogue for the concluding venue of the ROCI exhibition, which was at the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, D.C.]—this was in 1990 or '91—we were working on the catalogue for the exhibition. We were having a discussion with the people in the publications department. And the young woman said—Bob said something about the photographs bleeding off the page or whatever it was. Then she said, "Well, ordinarily we don't—" and he just cut her short in mid-sentence and says, "We're not talking about ordinary." So he had very strong ideas about how he wanted things done.

Q: So the presentation—it makes perfect sense—was actually an extension of his artistic practice.

White: Yes. I saw him install a gallery full of photographs—on the ROCI tours, he took photographs in all the different countries. There'd be a stack of photographs just against the wall. And he would just start to, "Hand me this one, hand me that one," and work his way around and get to the last wall and there'd be one last photograph on the floor and one last space. You don't know if he had that in mind the whole way around, but it just worked out. So he knew what he was doing for sure.

Q: That's a good story.

White: We disagreed, in one sense, in that he was almost like a mother hen that wanted every chick up on the wall for everyone to see and love. Some of us thought that more space around the works would've made each work look more special. Sometimes I would walk in and think, "Oh, I wish there were two fewer paintings on this wall or that wall."

Q: [Laughs]

White: But it was his show and his paintings and so, [laughs] of course, they looked the way he—

Q: Yes, you spoke earlier in your interview with the folks from San Francisco, about how he liked to turn the lights up in the gallery. That he wanted everything really brightly lit.

White: That was at the Whitney Museum, at the silkscreen show, particularly.

Q: That was a vexation for the conservators because they had limited foot-candle thresholds according to the AAM [American Alliance of Museums] standards. He was insistent about wanting everything to be bright. Are you saying he wasn't much of a filter when it came to his own work? He liked to put it all up there?

White: You could say that, yes. But not that he didn't ask other people's opinion. I was not in the studio that often in Florida, but there were times when he'd say, "Oh, do you think that's done?" Or, "What do you think about that?" Or, "Do you think that needs a touch of color?" Maybe he didn't care what I said for an answer but—

Q: He was being polite.

White: —he asked the question. [Laughs]



David White with Rauschenberg's *Moon Burn (Scale)* (1977), Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1977. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Perhaps he knew, or perhaps he didn't know. We'll never know. [Laughs]

What was the first crisis you had to avert here, in your job?

White: One thing, Bob lived in his own—his whole life was about his work, day and night. Of course, a lot of it involved other people's participation. So if one didn't make a boundary, he would happily have you working every day, all day, and, "What do you mean, Christmas?"

Right at the same time that I started working here, I got a small house in the Springs on Long Island, where I very much liked the idea of going there on weekends as a little change from the bustle of Manhattan. So there was a time or two where Bob would say something about something happening on a Saturday. But it never was a crisis. I just said, "If I don't get away from the city a little bit, I'm going to be overwhelmed by it." He very much respected it. He would start to say something and he'd say, "Oh right, you're not going to be here then." So if the boundaries were set, he was respectful of them, for the most part.

Q: But there were no calamities of work missing or damaged or lost or—

White: Pretty much not. I remember one time there was a small piece of sculpture that needed to be photographed when I was in Captiva. It was a little ceramic, star-shaped, flower-shaped piece, on a piece of wire attached to a brick [Untitled, 1995]. In order to make it look better in the photograph, I stuck up one of those white, Lucite cutting boards from the kitchen—it was just in

the house—and it fell over, knocked the sculpture over, and broke one of the points off the little flower before I had a chance to click the camera.

Bob was in the next room and said, “What’s that noise?” Well, what can I say other than, “I just broke your sculpture.” He was never unreasonable. He had every reason to yell. But it wasn’t really a crisis. It just was one of those things that gets repaired with some glue. I felt horrible about it—

Q: Of course.

White: —of course. And he might have felt quite horrible about it but—

Q: It was a piece he had made?

White: Yes.

Q: He might have accepted that the falling over, and the breaking, and the repair was part of its destiny.

White: [Laughs] He behaved that way, which was nice for me.



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled, 1995
Clay, wire and brick
9 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 2 3/8 inches
(24.1 x 14 x 6 cm)

Q: So in 1980, you're managing, trying to standardize all of the archival practices. You're dealing with the registration. You're trying to catch up with all the recordkeeping to that point in time. And also, you're trying to keep up with new work that's coming in. So it's clear, this is a big job. You're not going to show up like the Lone Ranger and ride off into the sunset in a week or two. It's a—

White: It's a never finished job.

Q: It's still never finished—

White: Yes. [Laughs]

Q: —even now. At what point did you actually begin to enter things into computers?

White: I really don't know how much time it was after 1980, if it was within the next couple of years or—since I wasn't actually doing it. Early on, it was a combination of putting things in the computer but still keeping the ring binders, adding the notations. That went on up until 2000, when we finally said, "It's time to put those aside and just use the computers." We still use the ring binders for just reference or as file folders or—

Q: But with the actual day-to-day archival work and recordkeeping, the ring binders were dispensed with in 2000.

White: Right.

Q: At this point, has everything been entered into computers? Everything in the ring binders?

White: Yes, although there's still scanning of images to be added to the information. But a great deal has been done, yes.

Q: Is it searchable here?

White: Yes.

Q: So you can access all of that here. Is the Foundation contemplating having that be searchable off-site?

White: They're finishing up work on—a website has existed, but they've just been working on a revised, expanded version, which, I believe comes out in October or within the next few months. One will be able to go and search a lot of artworks. I heard the number, something like 700 to begin with. I may be wrong about that number but—and then cross-referencing—

Q: So a person, anywhere, with a computer and an internet connection—

White: Yes, I think you can go to the Rauschenberg website and start looking up lots of—

Q: Will you need a password? Will you need to sign on, or will it be public access?

White: I'm not sure, and it may be varied. It may be that there's a certain level of access for everybody and then you have to be a scholar or something to get—I really am not involved with that part.

Q: Who is handling that?

White: Well, a number of people are working on it. In the next room, Laurence [“Laury”] Getford, who had worked with Bob in Captiva, has now moved here and works and lives full-time in New York. The main focus at the moment is getting this newer version of the website up and running. But there are other people that are scrubbing the data to make sure it's all entered correctly—because if this is the official website, the info better be correct here.

[Laughter]

Q: Right. This raises the question, was there another person, a counterpart to the position you held here, at Captiva? He must have had help there.

White: Bradley Jeffries was office manager. I should think she was often involved with the initial registry of a new batch of work—with registry sheets, would come up. I didn't necessarily go down to Captiva every time there was a new work. She was very involved with the photography aspect of Bob's output, as well. But she and I spoke practically daily, or multiple times a day, on the phone just to do with business.

Q: You worked closely in concert with each other.

White: Yes.

Q: Did the documents come up by snail mail, or did you use fax or—email was not that ubiquitous in those early days.

White: No, it was faxing after snail mail and before email.

Q: Right.

White: We've [laughs] tried to keep pace with what's available.

Q: Did they have the doppelganger ring binders down there to the ones you had here?

White: Yes, in fact, the ones here go back to the beginning. The earliest works are from 1948 or '49.

Q: Right.

White: When I started work in 1980, we just went back to '79 and made duplicates. These were the official ones, but they had the information on a sheet with, usually, a duplicate. If there'd been a transparency taken of the work, one would be kept in Captiva, one would be sent up here. Bob could turn to Bradley and get information about a past work, at least from '79 forward.

Q: So beyond that date, you and she had duplicate ring binders—

White: Yes.

Q: —both in Captiva and in New York. That's very interesting. That now, obviously, with an online archive is no longer needed.

White: Right.

Q: But it does express a thoroughness and a business-like approach to things that is impressive.

White: Sometimes if someone would be visiting Bob in Captiva, Bob would decide to give them a drawing as a present when they were leaving, which I wouldn't necessarily know about if Bradley didn't tell me or she didn't write it in her book. We didn't do a thing where we, every month, reviewed the books and make sure they were duplicates—I think a lot of information didn't get added to her records about exhibition history and stuff like that. Once the work was up here and was lent to shows, and came back here, it wasn't necessary to have that in both places.

Q: It wasn't information that was going to be useful to her.

White: Not so much. It was more that Bob had more interest in seeing images of things if he was choosing works to donate to a charity or choose things for an exhibition or something like that.

Q: Were you involved at all with any of his early charitable enterprises?

White: Not so much other than, sometimes he'd say, "I need and want to give a work to an AIDS benefit," for example. He'd say, "Send me some suggestions." Sometimes he'd be specific and say, "I want it to be a major work," or "It can be a drawing or a print." I was involved just in that area.

Q: He funded a program called Change [Inc.], right?

White: Right.

Q: Helping young—

White: It was emergency grants for artists who were either—Con Ed was turning off their power, or the phone was being turned off, or the landlord was going to kick them out, or— It was small amounts of money very quickly. It had nothing to do with their art-making activities. But it was grants to artists for just surviving, so they could make art. It still exists.

Q: Were you at all involved with that?

White: I was a board member, at one point, but not really—that was another thing that was really Bradley Jeffries's responsibility, reviewing the letters that would come in for applications for Change. They had to submit slides to show they were an artist or whatever the criteria was. Then either she, or she and Bob, sat down together and decided who would get how much.

Q: That was run out of the Captiva—

White: Right.

Q: —office. Let's talk a little about ROCI. Now [when] that got rolling, you had already been working here four years? Three years?

White: Actually, the first venue was 1985, so it was five years before—

Q: Five years.

White: But I think the discussions had probably started—it could easily have been a year in advance, the whole notion of it.

Q: What was the genesis of the idea? I know it's been written about extensively, but I'd like to hear your version, what you saw as a person at the table in the discussions.

White: I don't know how it first—I wasn't really involved, necessarily, in the very beginning. But Bob always had this international inquisitiveness and enthusiasm, thinking that art was this universal language that could be accessible to everybody, as opposed to a verbal language. I don't know where the notion first came from to go to these—they didn't call them third world countries, there was a term, troubled or—

Q: Developing nations?

White: Something like that.

Q: A little more politically correct.

White: [Laughs] Then it just grew into this thing, this major endeavor, which went on between 1985 and '91. He went to eleven countries [note: including the U.S.]. He would go to a country.

He would take photographs and gather indigenous materials, if there was something that was appropriate, and then come back to America. He made the artwork for all the different countries here, in America, in his studio, and then would go back. There was always this initial contact with an art institution in that country. A museum would agree to have this event. Then he would go back and this exhibition would take place.

The first country was Mexico. Bob did at most ten or a dozen *ROCI MEXICO* paintings [1985]. But that doesn't really make a show. It was also a bunch of his own work that he'd made previously, to which the ROCI Mexico works were added. As it went to each venue, more ROCI works got added, and more and more of the early works got deleted. So the final venue at the National Gallery in '91 [had] only works that had been made for the various ROCI countries.



Robert Rauschenberg
Park / ROCI MEXICO, 1985
Acrylic, collage, and graphite on canvas
114 x 51 3/8 inches (289.6 x 130.5 cm)
Minneapolis Institute of Arts
Gift of Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
and the P. D. McMillan Memorial Fund

Q: What was, really, the genesis of the discussion? How did he decide to target specific countries? How did he select where he was going to?

White: There were other people. Donald [“Don”] Saff was particularly involved as the director of the whole ROCI thing. He could be very specific—

Q: We’ll be talking to him soon.

White: Yes, I remember you said. Somebody would come up with suggestions of countries if they found people were under the thumb of a political situation that was undemocratic. I think that kind of thing appealed to Bob, that he could maybe get to these people through his artwork or assist in the opening up of a situation.

Q: It’s interesting because this predates the revelations of declassified files from the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and USIA [United States Information Agency] about how Abstract Expressionism was used during the Cold War as a propaganda weapon. But having art being an embassy of freedom, of goodwill, the value of aesthetic experience, as coming from an individual, is interesting.

White: He was very, very intelligent, and very far-reaching in his ideas. The same with all the interest in the environment and saving the planet. Bob thought and worked along those lines well before it was a kind of fashionable thing where everyone’s talking about, “Is it green?” [Laughs]

Q: Right. Were there any other artists or any other notable people—scientists, writers—who he was in conversation with, whom you perhaps knew or met at the inception of this?

White: Not ones that I met, necessarily. But the *ROCI MEXICO* catalogue has a poem by Octavio Paz. When they could make a connection with an artist, or philosopher, or whatever, from the country they were going to, they were happy to do that.

Q: I think about some of the programs that were sponsored by the Rockefeller Brothers [Fund], like the Inter-American Arts and others that were creating cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Latin America. There were other organizations fostering other exchanges like that, as well. I'm just naturally curious if he was in conversation with other artists in these countries and—obviously, he had to be in conversation with the museum people.

White: Often, when the actual exhibition took place in the country, there would be press conferences and events where artists were invited. Sometimes Bob would speak to a whole room full of them, or there could be a question-and-answer period. Yes, he got engaged in that aspect, with a translator at his side depending on what country he was in.



Rauschenberg and a Tibetan official at the opening ceremony for *ROCI TIBET*, Revolutionary Exhibition Hall, Lhasa, December 5, 1985. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Thomas Buehler

Q: That raises an interesting question. Were there any foreign languages he spoke?

White: No, he was very self-assured about just plunging into—he would probably say yes, he probably spoke quite a few or something like that. [Laughs] But he didn't. He might know various words in certain languages but—

Q: You shared that he had dyslexia but that he had somehow acquired a very curious eloquence.

White: Indeed, yes. [Laughs]

Q: I wonder how the translators were able to deal with that. Was he pretty—

White: That's hard to—I never talked to them and said, "How was it?"

Q: Did you attend any of these events? Did you travel at all with ROCI?

White: I went to some of the countries. I went to Mexico, being the first one. Although I had been traveling in Europe and so I ended up arriving the day before the opening. So I basically wasn't involved in the installation. I went as an observer, practically. In some of the other ones, I was there early on, helping Charlie and Thomas install the exhibitions.

Q: What was the venue of the Mexico show?

White: In the Rufino Tamayo Museum [Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City].

Q: Oh, yes, sure! In Chapultepec Park—

White: Yes.

Q: —beautiful little place. That was the opening. What was that like? How did you like Mexico? I've not heard you indicate, in our prior conversations, that you had traveled in Latin America. How did you find Mexico?

White: Well, I certainly enjoy traveling any place. I found Mexico City a little hard going, as far as the altitude and the bus fumes—

Q: [Laughs]

White: —and it was easy to get [laughs] exhausted or drunk. But of course, it was wonderful.

Q: How'd Bob find it? Did he—

White: He very much liked to travel, too. He loved food and cooking, and so the more exotic something was, the happier he was just to give it a try.

Q: Did anything come out of the Mexican exhibition, like new associates or new partners in future endeavors? Any—

White: In fact the director—[Robert R.] Bob Littman—I guess that was his title—was helpful when they decide they wanted to show in Cuba. It was tricky to get the work into Cuba. So it was arranged through Bob Littman in Mexico, to get the work in that way. There was an association that helped with another step of the ROCI tour.

Q: There was an exhibition in Cuba.

White: Yes.

Q: What was that like? Were you there for that?

White: Yes. That was quite a—

Q: That must have been very interesting. How did the State Department weigh in on that?

White: It ended up that we were officially—the only way you could go is if you were invited and you were not spending American dollars. Somehow—I don't know all the specifics of that. I don't know if we were invited and they gave us [laughs] money to spend or—I remember when we were flying from the airport in Miami. There's nothing on the board saying the flight to Cuba leaves at such-and-such. [Laughs] Someone comes in and says, "Psst—"

[Laughter]

White: —Gate 27 at 2 AM. No passports got stamped. It seemed quite exotic and exciting to—

Q: Real cloak and dagger adventure.

White: [Laughs] Yes, it was fun.

Q: How were your accommodations there?

White: It had formerly been a Hilton hotel. But after Castro took power, everything started getting run down. So it was called—

Q: It was all nationalized.

White: —the Cuba Libre Hotel. The bathrooms were iffy. The food was iffy.

Q: But the rum was all right.

White: The rum, yes. [Laughs]

Q: How long were you there?

White: Ten days or two weeks. It was installed in three different spaces. There was a fortress-like space where some of the work was installed. Then the photography was in—I don't recall the names of all the specific ones. They're all in the catalogues. [*Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI CUBA*, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Castillo de la Real Fuerza, and Casa de las Américas, Galería Haydée Santamaría, 1988]

Q: So the exhibition in Cuba was installed in three venues.

White: Three different buildings—

Q: There was a fortress.

White: And Casa de las Américas—

Q: And another venue.

White: Right.

Q: So did you meet—?

White: Bob was invited to go stay at Castro's house for the weekend. So it was—

Q: Interesting.

White: Yes, very. I was not part of that there. I never laid eyes on Mr. Castro.

Q: Smoking a lot of Cohibas. Did he ever speak of that experience?

White: Oh, I'm sure he did. There may be interviews of it.

Q: But not to you.

White: No, we were there together. I think his visit with Castro was at the end. At that point, I left to come back here. I don't really remember specific stories. I'm sure he probably told some of what it was like.

Q: It must have been interesting. But you weren't there. What I'm trying to find out is how did the ROCI program affect the work you did here?

White: It just meant more of it. It's a complicated exhibition to keep track of, because it was not a checklist of fifty things going to one place, and the next place, and the next place. There was always stuff being added to it, and always stuff being taken down. Even at the last moment, there would be not enough room for the last three paintings, for example. Things would be left out. Even now, we're still trying to trace what, exactly, was on the walls for each venue.

Q: You're looking at—

White: Had I to do it again, I would make sure that the day of the opening I went around and made a list or took a photographic record or—

Q: If they had only hired you to make miniatures of each piece.

White: Yes.

[Laughter]

Q: Then you'd know for sure.

White: Yes.

Q: You're comparing checklists with installation photographs and that kind of thing.

White: Right.

Q: You're basically—

White: We have records saying these things went into Cuba and these things left Cuba. You know it was there. But then you're not sure if it necessarily got up on the wall, so then there's—

Q: And which wall, in which venue, and so forth. Reconstructing all of that means that you have to go back to the primary materials, the checklists and installation shots—

White: At one time, Bradley and I tried to list on the back of the photographs of the work which venues that work had been in. It was much closer to the time it happened. I'd have to look at that all to see how complete it is or—

Something came up just very recently about a certain piece, a *Jammer* shown in Cuba, for example. We couldn't find out. We saw that it had gone to Cuba, but nothing we saw indicated it was actually on the wall.

Q: Who would have been responsible, on-site, for making the checklist for—

White: No one said, "Oh, don't forget to make a checklist." Once it was something that I certainly should have been doing or could have been doing. Or Thomas Buehler was also very

involved in—who knew, obviously, everything that was there and helping get everything up on the wall. But it's so easy to—even shows from two years ago, you think, “Was such-and-such a painting in that exhibition or not?” Often, it was something that was considered and then, at the last minute, was decided against or something like that.

Q: You mentioned a couple times earlier how Bob Rauschenberg was always eager to have things photographed. How he made a comment that he was hoping that people were taking pictures. So the installation of the exhibition was also—it was important to have a document of that as well.

White: Although, actually, he didn't apparently turn to anybody and say, “Make a photo document of the installation.” So there are a lot of informal photographs. Thomas took a lot. Charlie Yoder took a lot. Other friends that were there did. One can gather an awful lot of information from poring over those. Often, those are not in any kind of organized way, at the moment. It's part of the things we're doing, gathering these archival materials together.

Q: So it's one of the few haphazard genres of data with which you're working, is the installation photographs.

White: Specifically, installation photographs, yes.

Q: That's interesting. What was the most memorable ROCI show or venue that you were involved in?

White: Probably, of the whole tour, [it] was Tibet, which I didn't go to. I've seen photographs of it. But it looks, as far as the exoticism of the situation and the people, absolutely wonderful.

[*Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI TIBET*, Tibet Exhibition Hall, Lhasa, 1985]

Kuala Lumpur, the venue was a former hotel. It was now the national museum [National Art Gallery] and the walls seemed to be made out of butter, practically. [Laughs] It was very hard to get things—heavier works—installed.

Q: It was like a crumbly plaster and—

White: Yes, so it was a lot of improvising. How do we deal with this, at the last minute. The King was coming to the opening. All of a sudden, you realized you couldn't have a duck in an image because that would insult the King. These funny little things that would never cross your mind. “Oh, get that painting off the wall! There's a duck, or something.”

Q: But of the ROCI shows that you attended, that you were a part of, that you were working on, what was the most memorable one for you?

White: I think that Kuala Lumpur, because of those kind of things. [*Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MALAYSIA*, 1990]

Q: Oh, you were at Kuala—okay.

White: That was part of it.

Q: The offensive duck. So you—

White: The whole Cuba thing was just such an exotic situation and—

Q: In those years, too, because that's right near the last years of the Soviet Union. We still have an embargo with Cuba so there's—

White: Oh, yes.

Q: Although more Americans are able to get there. But still, travel is restricted. I would imagine, in those days, it was even more so. It was—

White: Right. There were Scandinavian or Canadian people—you didn't see Americans.

Q: How did the operations here evolve? Let's say past the ROCI era. You were explaining how, originally, there was a warehouse across the street and then that moved to the West 30s. So the actual handling of the artwork here, at this location, became more and more of a remote thing.

Ultimately, you have—

White: The larger pieces, yes.

Q: Right. Here, you still do have an inventory of the artworks but they're mostly works on paper?

White: We did up until just last week.

Q: Up until the renovation.

White: We did have smaller framed works in racks and unframed things in flat files. But those have all just had to be moved because of the renovation.

Q: Well, the gentleman I came up in the elevator with, told me that you're expecting the renovation to be completed by October something.

White: Yes, I guess.

Q: So it's not major.

White: Right, it's—

Q: You're not changing the roof or anything.

White: No, no it's—

Q: They're just improvements. At that point, will all of that inventory return here?

White: Not necessarily. The notion was to basically have the art storage in a warehouse space, away from the Foundation offices.

Q: Maybe this is an appropriate time to pose the question. Robert Rauschenberg, Incorporated, which is the organization that you worked for all of these years, is—

White: Right.

Q: —being, basically, absorbed by the Foundation?

White: I think that's how they describe it, yes. There were two organizations. I never quite understood the difference. New York City was Robert Rauschenberg, Incorporated, and the Captiva organization was called Untitled Press—

Q: Untitled, yes.

White: —Incorporated. But my understanding is that both those entities get absorbed by the Foundation. The artwork itself is to be the property of the Foundation or overseen by the Foundation.

Q: I see. Are you involved, at all, with the estate?

White: No, I wasn't—

Q: So he endowed this—

White: In his will, the work still in his possession was to eventually be the property of the Foundation, to be used however the Foundation saw fit.

Q: How early on did he begin to discuss the idea of a foundation?

White: It was founded in 1990 so it existed for eighteen years before he died in 2008. But he was friendly with the lawyer Theodore [W. "Ted"] Kheel. I think Kheel was partly responsible for advising him that it's nicer to set something up in his lifetime, where he could have some control about what it was like and how it was arranged. Because the notion of the time after Bob died was something that Bob didn't like to think about at all. So it was—

Q: He wouldn't be there. So why did he care about it, right? He wanted—

White: It was a major thing of Ted Kheel's to get him to agree to even talk about this stuff.

Q: How heavily involved was he in the operation of the Foundation?

White: For his lifetime, he was the chairman of the board and the president? Or solely the chairman of the board.

Q: So he was—

White: It was his—

Q: It was his—

White: —baby.

Q: —baby. So he was heavily involved in that.

White: Yes. Very much so.

Q: I read somewhere that his son is also involved in it.

White: His son, Christopher [Rauschenberg], is now the chairman of the board and president of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, yes.

Q: Just a matter of curiosity, how many years before he actually undertook to organize it, was he pondering this move? Did he ever—

White: It's something he didn't talk about.

Q: That's what I was—

White: Yes. I don't know if Ted Kheel just came to him one day and said, "Here's a proposal, something to think about." If it's something that he said yes at the end of the sentence, or mulled it over for years, I don't really know.

Q: Another question I have, vis-a-vis art registration and archivism is, works by others in his collection. I remember reading the SFMOMA interview, in which you spoke of his muse wall. His having perhaps, his own works and artworks by others.

White: Yes.

Q: You must have been involved in that to some degree, at least, walking into his personal space and seeing changes to these displays. How would you characterize his appetites as a collector?

White: I don't think that he was one of those collectors that was always out to find the masterpiece by whatever artist.

Q: Right.

White: But he was friendly with many, many artists. Over the years, there was a lot of exchanging of art and also buying of art on Bob's part, whether it was to help a friend out or he loved the work and wanted it. I think when Bob hung the work on the wall, he saw the work itself but, probably, it reminded him of his friendship or—there were probably layers of meaning for him.

Q: Subjective response. He liked it.

White: Yes.

Q: He liked the person who did it.

White: Yes, exactly.



Rauschenberg in his Broadway studio with works from his private collection, New York, 1965. Photo: Alexander Liberman/The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19), © J. Paul Getty Trust

Q: Did he have any collections apart from contemporary art?

White: No, although he looked at auction catalogues and things that would come in the mail. And there's a small Matisse sketch of some of the decor for the steeple at the chapel in Vence [Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence, France]. So it's of a period pre-Rauschenberg or earlier. It wasn't only works that were being made during his lifetime. But he didn't have many older things.

Q: But he didn't have any other collections of—

White: Oh—

Q: —stamps, butterflies, coins, Samurai armor, anything like that.

White: He had a cabinet in the bedroom down here with odds and ends of things. Some could well be kind of valuable and other stuff just—

Q: Like a *schatzkammer* of—

White: Exactly, yes. It was very much not concentrated in one area of collecting. At one point, he bought a number of American Indian rugs or blankets, so there may be four of those around. But I think that was—there was an artist on the West Coast named [Anthony] Tony Berlant that came to town at one point and interested a lot of the Castelli artists in these blankets. I think a lot of them bought them at the same time.

Q: The blanket over your shoulder.

White: That could well be one of the ones he got from Tony.

Q: How would you characterize his taste?

White: I think he was not interested in that notion of good taste. He would say things like, “I hate furniture.”

[Laughter]

White: The third floor, which was kind of the main living space in this building, at one end is that kitchen with that enormous—

Q: That great Atlas—

White: —stove. [Laughs]

Q: —gas stove. Wow.

White: There’s a wooden table. The main getting together was around that table. It would spill out into the other room, but there was never really other furniture in that room. There was that

mummy case at the far end of the room. Or if there was a big event going on, maybe some benches would be brought up. Or there were birthday parties or something where big tables would be put in for people to sit down and have a meal.

In fact, he designed some furniture with Gemini [Graphics Editions Limited]. It's very unlikely, atypical furniture.

Q: It's always a matter of some interest when you have a person who's such a well-known, very famous, highly regarded, many friends, bon vivant, foodie—one wonders what gave him pleasure. What objects and what kind of environment gave him pleasure and made him feel happy?

White: He liked articles of clothing very much. I think he had even studied at Kansas City Art Institute—clothing design, or I don't know what the class was called. But there are pictures of an early—looks like an evening gown. But he'd stapled ivy [laughs] all over the dress. It was always kind of unorthodox from early on. His own collection of shirts and neckties was very exuberant with lots of polka-dots, and bright colors, and stripes, and—



Ivy gown designed by Rauschenberg, modeled by a fellow student at Kansas City Art Institute, 1947. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: He was not trying to aspire to some GQ paradigm. He was—

White: Not in any way.

Q: But flamboyant—

White: Yes.

Q: —perhaps, would be appropriate.

White: Or those kind of incredibly luscious scarfs that you get in India. The material of something or the color of something would, certainly, interest him.

Q: So he appreciated that kind of refinement, as well.

White: Oh, yes.

Q: You spoke about him as having a great love of food. And he was a good cook. What was his favorite dish to prepare?

White: I never heard him say, “This is my favorite.” He would be—

Q: There must have been one he did more than others.

White: It’s interesting, of course, when he came here, Sachika was in charge of food preparation.

Q: Ah, that’s right.

White: Then that became a little conflicted, because Bob would often want to add his little touch to what Sachika was doing, which is the fear of the cook. It’s not necessarily what you want. But Bob was not at all a recipe follower. There was a cabinet above the stove in Captiva that had all kinds of spices. He would be stirring the big pot of soup and then taste, and then look up, and just go up and down the spices and shake in a little of this and a little of that. But he would be funny about it. One time he was making some sort of—it was supposed to be kind of a spicy soup. But it wasn’t working. He finally said, “I think I’ve invented mashed potatoes.”

[Laughter]

Q: He seems like he enjoyed cooking. He enjoyed clothes. He enjoyed travel. If he were here at the table right now and I were to ask him, “What’s for dinner?” What do you think he would say?

White: It’s hard to know. He liked southern things, of gumbos and—

Q: Regional.

White: Periodically, we’d have something called a taco festival. There’d be beans and those flat breads and—

Q: The jambalaya—

White: Those kinds of things a lot.

Q: —étouffée—

White: Yes.

Q: —and Texas barbecue. Southern is from his home country, as it were.

White: Right. And he was very interested in plants. He always wanted lots of flowers around.

Whenever he was coming to town, we would get flowers in advance. Or he would get them. He grew flowers and plants in Captiva.

Q: You mentioned, during our previous interview, that you would go to the Glass House in New Canaan, and you and David Whitney would work in the garden together. Was Bob Rauschenberg a gardener as well? Did he enjoy—

White: Yes—

Q: —working in the garden?

White: Actually, I never saw him spend a long time in the garden. But he seemed to really be delighted in— He had a lot of tropical plants in Captiva, birds-of-paradise, and palms and he would very proudly point out something in bloom when I would come down to visit. But there were other people that helped to care-take property and—

Q: Sure.

White: —take care of things. There were house plants and pots that he watered and—

Q: But he didn't have a pet patch of basil or chili plants or anything like that?

White: At the bottom of the house—the kitchen level and the living level was one flight up in Captiva, just because that’s the way the houses are—and at the bottom of the stairs, there was a patch with herbs and basil and that kind of stuff.

Q: So he could just run out and—

White: —get something for dinner. Of course, there were a lot of key limes, and mangoes, and grapefruit, and wonderful things in Captiva that he delighted in and was very generous with. He would send up packages of mangoes at Christmas time to people. And he loved incredibly hot, spicy things. He would get the hottest kind of peppers and make these little killer hot sauces that he would send out as presents.

Q: Dare you to eat them. *Habanero picante*. If he was going out to supper, where would he go if he was in town?

White: He liked to go to fancy restaurants. What’s the one that was in the Village or in Tribeca?

[Note: restaurant is Chanterelle] That very well-known—

Q: Long established?

White: It’s no longer in business. But, they got a bunch of different artists to do menus over the years.

Q: Oh, yes.

White: He did a menu for them, as well.

Q: I think all of these are dimensions of the man: to understand his appetites, his tastes, what he enjoyed, how he addressed life day-by-day. Because when you imagine the ROCI show traveling around all of these exotic locations, as you said, in some places the food was terrific and other places it was not so terrific. Havana was not a gustatory paradise.

White: Right.

Q: But what about Kuala Lumpur? There's a lot of spicy food in Malaysia. How did he seem to enjoy that?

White: I'm sure he liked it if he was eating a lot of spicy things.

Q: I assume you were there together with him, weren't you?

White: Yes, but often there would be so many people or there would be—

Q: I see.

White: —dinners and I wouldn't necessarily be at the same table with him and that kind of thing.

Q: But you wouldn't just slip out of the hotel and head over to some noodle joint and sample the local fare?

White: Not so much. It's interesting. He liked to travel a lot, but he also—I think, as often with heavy drinkers, they're very happy to stay put with their supply of alcohol. There was an awful lot of time spent in hotel rooms and room service. There was a constant flow of people wanting to see him and come visit. It's not as if he was a recluse in any way. Between the phone, and the television was always on. But he wasn't necessarily an early riser at all. He never jumped up and said, "Let's go on a walking tour of the city." [Laughs]

Q: Was he athletic at all? Did he play tennis and golf or—

White: He played tennis a bit in Captiva. He windsurfed some. He liked to fish in the Gulf right outside the door.



Rauschenberg in Captiva, Florida, 1978.
Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Attributed to Billy Klüver

Q: He's a southern man so he knows how to wield a hook and line, probably knows how to shoot birds, too, or whatever.

White: He was not a hunter. I think he was a disappointment to his father who wanted to shoot everything that moved. Bob didn't want to hurt anything. That was one of their bones of contention.

Q: But he was okay with annoying the fish.

White: The fish, that was fine. [Laughs]

Q: Perhaps we could take a break and resume tomorrow.

White: Okay.

Q: Thank you.

White: Good. Thank you.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: 3PM

Session #3

Interviewee: David White

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: James McElhinney

Date: August 1, 2013

Q: We're talking with David White at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, 381 Lafayette Street in New York City on the 1st of August, 2013. Good afternoon.

White: Good afternoon.

Q: If we could do a little housekeeping from yesterday. I wanted to just touch on a few points. First, the warehouse, and the choice of location. After we spoke it struck me as odd that Thomas Buehler would pick a crime-ridden Westchester suburb as being an appropriate place for all of this treasure. Did he have any particular idea about—it is sort of an unpleasant town, so I was just wondering what—

White: Mount Vernon, yes. It wasn't he alone. He worked with Bennet [H.] Grutman, one of the trustees of the revocable trust. I don't know, in fact, who was the person that came up with, "Here's a place worth looking at."

Q: Bennet Grutman?

White: Correct.

Q: It just struck me after our conversation that that was a curious choice of venue. That it's a very troubled suburb.

White: The area immediately where the warehouse is has other warehouse-type buildings, so it's a few blocks removed from the apartments and houses of probably the more troubled area.

Q: Right, it's a dedicated industrial area.

White: Right.

Q: So not many people standing on street corners.

White: It was following looking around closer, starting in Manhattan and then going out to Brooklyn and Queens, and I think even probably northern New Jersey, and not finding what seemed to be a suitable place close by. They went further afield in their search.

Q: Do you think Thomas Buehler's decision to move to City Island was based on the location of the warehouse or vice versa?

White: I'm not sure which came first. It may well be that he had the property—but that's a question for him—and then looked for workplaces which would be close by his residence, which would make sense of course.

Q: It's an island, but as we both know it's not quite Captiva.

White: No, interesting spot though.

Q: It is. It's a middle class, working class, fishing, watermen—it's an old neighborhood. An interesting place, but a curious choice for a person in the arts. It wouldn't seem like the neighbors would offer a whole lot of stimulation.

White: Well it turns out that the woman who had been head of prints [Deborah Wye] at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York] also lives in City Island. They did not know one another at the time that Thomas got his property, but they've since become acquainted I believe. It's near enough New York City that you can work in Manhattan, and yet be in this completely other location.

Q: And have a waterfront property.

White: Yes. There's this single street that runs the length of the island that's the spine and every cross rib street ends at the water.

Q: Learn something every day. We were speaking also about the ROCI program, and that was eleven exhibitions that culminated in an exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington. At the time, when the show came back to the U.S. it was met with some lukewarm response from the anointed art critics. I was wondering, what was Bob Rauschenberg's reaction to that?

White: I don't remember specifically talking to him about it. I imagine he was, well, "Wait, they'll see the light eventually." At one point when somebody asked him about reception of his work in general, he said, "It's taken twenty years for the public to catch up to what I've been doing." I think he probably had the same—it was interesting that the ROCI show was almost shown concurrently with the early Rauschenberg, the early fifties exhibition [*Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*] at the Corcoran Gallery [of Art] in Washington. There were two shows—of particularly early work and then the most recent work—practically simultaneously. There was a lot of that comparing one show with the other; one body of work with the other.

Q: But he was not discouraged by it, or?

White: Not that I was aware of.

Q: How were the shows received by the critics abroad in the venues or in the countries where they were exhibited? Like Mexico and Cuba? What were the writers and the pundits there saying about it?

White: I really don't know that either. We have scrapbooks full of clippings in the various foreign languages of the different countries. There was a lot of attention paid to it as far as press coverage. But I never tried to see translated versions to know if they were raving, or not, about it.

Q: Do you recall if any distinguished artists from these other parts of the world came into his orbit, or his circle, or entourage, or world, as a result of this show in any durable way?

White: Not so much distinguished artists, that I'm aware of. The students in the various countries, in Russia and China apparently, were very much overwhelmed and excited, and stimulated by this work that they'd never seen. Western work. Particularly in China. In Russia they referred to it as a period either before Rauschenberg or after Rauschenberg. They feel that it really made a—actually I'm not sure if that was China or Russia. One of those two countries.

Then there was, at the Venice Biennale a couple of years later, the Russian pavilion was called *Rauschenberg to Us, We to Rauschenberg*. One late work of Rauschenberg's was exhibited along with a lot of work by the younger Russian artists. So he was very much influencing or inspiring the younger people's work. [Note: The exhibition *Rauschenberg to Us, We to Rauschenberg* consisted of artworks by non-union Soviet artists. It was the inaugural exhibition at First Gallery, Moscow, held concurrently with Rauschenberg's *ROCI MOSCOW*, Tretyakov Gallery, 1989. The Soviet Minister of Culture selected works from this exhibition to present at the Forty-fourth Venice Biennale, in 1990].

Q: Did any of these younger artists or students, at some subsequent date, come to the United States? Did they maintain correspondences with him or contacts with him in any way?

White: They may have. That's the kind of thing, [my] being here and his being in Captiva, I wouldn't necessarily have known if somebody came or not.

Q: So you wouldn't appear in Captiva, and he would introduce you to Yvonne, the art student from Russia or something.

White: No, that didn't happen while I was there.

Q: He may have, but that would be possibly a question for another narrator. We also spoke a little about his philanthropy. And we spoke a little about Change, Inc. How it worked and how he was personally involved in choosing to whom the moneys were awarded and in what sums. I was researching that last night and happened to notice that he's often listed as the co-founder of Change, Inc. Who were the other principles?

White: That I don't know. Did you read the date it was founded? [September 1970]

Q: No.

White: Because I'm not sure if that was pre-1980 or maybe before.

Q: I think it was 1970, actually.

White: Yes, it was before I was working for him so I'm not sure.

Q: But it would have been an ongoing thing when you were—

White: Right, it was certainly active and continues to be.

Q: Also the Artists Rights Today, I remember very well years ago—I think I was even in art school at that time—seeing a photograph of Bob Rauschenberg and Bob Scull having a conversation at an auction house. And the whole issue of artists' royalties came up. Can you offer any insights into how that conversation unfolded?

White: What's interesting about that confrontation, or exchange, with Bob Scull and Bob Rauschenberg, is over the years one hears that it was practically fisticuffs. Not so long ago, I saw a film or a fragment of footage of their confrontation. And Bob kind of gives Bob Scull a push, but in the way that Bob was a boisterous mover and slapper of backs in general. When you listen to the dialogue, it's not as confrontational as the story has become.

But it's true that Bob Rauschenberg's point was that the artist gets a minimal amount of money when it's sold originally, and then the collector often sells the same work for many times that amount. And none of that money goes to the artist. Bob was very much in favor of the Artists Rights Today and the notion of royalties, the same way it is in the music industry.

Q: That would probably have had an impact if that had become law. It hasn't. I think in some states there was some progress.

White: In California, there was a law passed that I think five percent of the sales price had to go to the artist. My understanding is that it pretty much fizzled because then everybody technically sold the works in another state, or they got around the law. So it pretty much hasn't happened. I'm not sure the law even still exists in California, I never hear anything about it.



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

Q: It'd be hard to enforce in California if it occurred in another state. It would be in a different jurisdiction. And it would ultimately change the way that art was being sold, the kinds of agreements that artists had with dealers traditionally, which is usually a handshake. Did Bob Rauschenberg ever work with a dealer in a way that required contracts?

White: I don't think there was ever an actual signed contract with any dealer. They obviously came to terms with what percentage of commission the dealer would take, or if there was a monthly stipend, how much that would be. There was a businesslike arrangement, in part, but I was not aware that there was ever a signed piece of paper or a lawyer involved.

Q: As the keeper of his records and archives, as the person who saw everything that came through in virtual form, you weren't dealing with the objects, as we explored yesterday. Thomas Buehler was the person actually in charge of the physical goods, and you were in charge of the virtual equivalents. There was never any evidence of contracts or agreements in any kind of a formal sense?

White: Everything was slightly dispersed in the fact that there was an office, as I said, in Captiva with Bradley Jeffries, and so there were duplicate records. Certain business went on with Bob and whomever he was doing business with in Captiva, and it wasn't automatically duplicates of everything that occurred sent up to the New York office.

Q: Ms. Jeffries would have seen or known about all of the agreements for editions, publications, exhibitions, work being loaned to this or that exhibition or project, reproduction rights for books or magazines or publication? She would see all of that?

White: Some of it, because it worked both ways. Because sometimes the people would contact the New York office and me, and so I would make the arrangements. Bradley and I were on the phone pretty much daily, so we knew often what was going on in the other offices.

Q: This raises another question, which is that it would seem logical, it would seem like a conventional assumption, that anyone who wanted to get to Bob Rauschenberg would have to go through the New York office to get to the Captiva office. That you were the gatekeepers, a filter,

to allow access. Were there times when people contacted him directly? Were they able to do that? Or did it pretty much filter through your office?

White: Certainly people could contact him directly if they knew the post office box number, the address. I'm sure it was an unlisted phone number. Even the New York phone number was supposedly an unlisted number, but it was out there. The phone rang constantly.

Q: It just is amazing when you imagine the amount of activity. The amount of not just creative activity in the studio, but the amount of activity in his interface with audiences via books, exhibitions, other media. It boggles the mind of how one would be able to keep track of all of this.

White: Boggles my mind too.

Q: Who was running around after him saying, "Bob you've got this edition at Gemini or Tamarind [Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; note: Rauschenberg did not make any prints at Tamarind] or wherever it was, and you've got this other edition with this other press, and you've got this book, and you've got this and you've got that?" And without some kind of like a paper trail. Somebody would have to create some kind of paper trail, so how did that happen?

White: There probably were paper trails from Gemini or the print publishers saying, "We're expecting you on whatever date to work on this, there will be proofs ready on such-or-such a

date and we'll send them to you." Bradley Jeffries was very much an office manager and kept track of all kinds of things at once. She had worked as a journalist in newspapers, so she was very good at keeping track of many divergent things at the same time. She did the planning of his travels, which he moved around a lot. She was working with the travel agents and arranging plane tickets and hotels and all that stuff as well.

Q: I'm inferring that if anybody, let's say a researcher at some point in time down the road, wanted to try to reconstruct these agreements or understandings that he had with service industries (printmaking studios, publishers, and so forth), that probably they were the ones keeping more of the records?

White: They would often start something, but then there would be usually a response from me or Bradley. We had file folders called: projects pending, projects current, projects completed, exhibitions pending, current, completed. All kinds of their files, boxes and boxes of file folders, and paperwork about all kinds of activities.

Q: All of that is researchable?

White: Yes. There was a period when Bob was being hounded by the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] to do with taxes, to try to prove that he either was or wasn't a resident of New York City, because it would affect what kind of taxes he paid. We had to prove where he was every day over such-and-such a period, a certain year. It meant going through— There were calendars kept with just the comings and goings. But sometimes it's hard to prove where you were or

where you weren't, if you don't have all the stubs from all the plane tickets, and the hotel rooms, and all that kind of stuff.

Q: Keep all the receipts. But all of that exists, all of the paper, all of the evidence, all of that exists?

White: Yes, it was a great deal of effort on everybody's part to dig through, to find the proof, to prove where Bob was or wasn't.

Q: Who kept his calendar?

White: I think Bradley kept a calendar, and then I don't know if Bob actually kept a calendar himself. I had a calendar of what was happening here. Bob's coming to town, or that kind of thing, so there are multiple versions.

Q: It would be interesting to compare three columns of three calendars and try to reconcile them all, and to see where the differences would be. It might be a project for somebody down the road. But what really is striking about all of our conversations is the level of organization that he surrounded himself with. The meticulousness of keeping every piece of evidence about everything. It just seems like it was his nature. Obviously if he was a young art student and he was already starting to do this, it was just in his nature. Where do you think that came from? A lot of painters aren't like that, as you know.

White: I don't know if that has to do with growing up in the Depression, and being deprived of a lot of things, and then you hang on to things. Apparently when he was a very young boy, he used to like to organize his bedroom and all his treasures on all his shelves in a grid-like form.

Someone remarked how similar it is to the compositional activities much later on. It started right from his very early youth.

Q: Interesting kind of process, if you think about some other artists, and even writers, who use index cards, and will cover the wall with index cards or Post-its, and move them around as an aid to story plotting or something like that. Did he know or was he friends with the artist Dieter Roth? He was a German[-born, Swiss] artist.

White: I'm aware of the name. I never heard Bob mention him and he certainly was never here when I was here.

Q: He had an interesting show years ago of the *Tischmatten*, the cardboard table-top liners that he used to work on. Whenever one became completely torn up, and cut up, and covered with stuff, he would save it as the detritus of his process.

White: That reminds me of a series that Rauschenberg did in the very early eighties, called the *Salvage series* [1983–85], where it came about because he was asked to design the sets and costumes for a Trisha Brown dance called *Set and Reset* [1983], I believe. It reminded me of what you were speaking of. In the costumes for the dancers, was a very gossamer white fabric, almost like wedding veil, a very open weave. The images were silkscreened on this fabric on a

horizontal surface, a great big table. When the fabric that was to be used to make the costume was lifted off, there was this residue of ink that had gone through this very open costume fabric. Bob was not one to just waste something of that sort. That became the inspiration for what he called the *Salvage* series, because he salvaged this imagery and added to it. That became a body of paintings, and it was also a play on words because the edge of fabric is called a selvage, and Bob loved wordplay. So it was perfect.



Robert Rauschenberg
Colonnade (Salvage), 1984
 Acrylic and collage on canvas
 113 1/4 x 274 x 2 inches (287.7 x
 696 x 5.1 cm)
 Private collection

Q: Right, the lateral edge of the cloth is called the selvage. So the *Salvage*, selvage series. That's very interesting, your observation about him being raised during the Depression and the impact that perhaps had on him. I think that he is of a generation that experienced a lot of hardship. I was reading somewhere that his clothing had been made of scraps at one point. His mom had made clothing from scraps of cloth, or something to that effect.

White: I'm not sure it was actually scraps of cloth, but he said that she could get more usable stuff out of a piece of fabric than anybody when she was making his shirts and knew how to put the patterns for the arm and whatever. I think he was very impressed by that, eventually. And he spoke about it as an element of the enormous painting, the *1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* [1981–98] painting that he did. There's a section of it which are actual shirts that have just been

flattened and mounted on a backing and get presented on the wall, almost like clouds flying through the sky. But I'm sure in some sense, it's a reference to his mother's making of clothing when he was a young boy.



Robert Rauschenberg
1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece,
1981–98 (detail)
Mixed media

Q: Obviously required by their poverty.

White: Yes, exactly. She'd say things like, if you can't afford it, you don't want it, or those kind of things. He would pass on these remarks, laughing.

Q: This waste-not, want-not ethic which came from a Depression childhood must have, in some way, informed his desire to be philanthropic. The idea of everything being useful, sharing, improving others through his means and hard-earned, well-deserved fortune.

White: I think very much so. The whole notion of Change, Inc. came about because he felt that tiny little bits of money might have helped enormously at a period when he was pretty much penniless and trying to become an artist in New York, and pay the rent, and eat. He never forgot that period of his life.

Q: He was also notable for his activities on behalf of the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts]. I was wondering if you could speak at all about his advocacy of governmental support for the arts? As we know, we were speaking about yesterday, that Congress has cut NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] in half. In 1990, as we remember—or '91 [1989]—it was all of that tumult about the Mapplethorpe exhibition [*Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1988–89] which was really just a pretext for the right wing to swoop down and eliminate government arts patronage. How did he share, in a private way, his opinions about that? We've seen what he did as a public advocate, but can you offer us a little more depth?

White: I don't think the private feelings were different than the public ones. He was very much supportive of politicians that advanced that culture and support for the arts. He would talk about it to anybody around the kitchen table late at night. Or go to Congress and speak if there was a hearing, and there was a chance to go talk and become a public voice about it. He never shied away from that as well.

Q: Did he actually give money to support the campaigns of the politicians who were in support of arts patronage?

White: I think the way he supported was not actually handing over money, but he very often made posters that the candidates or the committees sold to raise money. In fact, they raised a great deal of money through the sale of something that he did particularly for them.

Q: Were you ever acquainted with any of these politicians? Did they ever come into contact with you?

White: No.

Q: Did you know who they were?

White: He did a campaign poster for Hillary [Rodham] Clinton at one point and for quite a number of different ones in different branches of government, senators. There's a book of Rauschenberg posters that particularly have to do with causes that he supported.



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

Q: He was well known as a political activist and outspoken advocate of—opposing the Vietnam War.

White: Oh, very much so.

Q: And later, the whole NEA controversy, which was of course to the detriment of us all, was hindered by the Jesse Helms camp. This whole other conversation, probably not for this interview, has always been the struggle in American politics between the philistine element and the cultural element.

White: Also it could be on very local levels to do with housing for artists in New York City, and loft laws, what was allowable and what was being taken away. And t-shirts, where things he said were printed on t-shirts and sold or given away to make the cause more public.

Q: I remember that. There were, in the 1960s, laws that really prohibited living in these former industrial spaces. He was active in trying to get those regulations changed?

White: Right.

Q: But that would have been before your employment. Or was that still—?

White: It was still going on when I first came to the city in 1962. I was, before I worked for Bob, very aware that you had to have a sign that said AIR, meaning artist-in-residence, on the building. It was in part as an aid to a fireman, if a building was on fire, to know that there may be

a person asleep on the floor in this building that was presumably an industrial building with nobody in it at night.

Q: But you were not a loft denizen yourself? Eventually?

White: Oh, yes. I had a loft on Canal Street.

Q: You told us when we spoke the first day about your tiny room in an extremely elegant part of the city.

White: Then I had the other extreme. Seventh Street, between [Avenue] C and [Avenue] D, and all kinds of—

Q: So you enjoyed a lot of the neighborhoods here in New York. Just as an advocate of the arts, a lot of government officials, elected officials, might regard people who are inveighing against cuts in funds used to support cultural programs as being intellectuals, Ivy Leaguers, and so forth. And Bob Rauschenberg was really, in many ways, a man of the people. He came from very poor roots. His dad was in the oil business, but not at a remunerative level; he was not one of the members of petroleum club. A lot of hardship as a kid, he came up the hard way, and worked hard, and did well. He was really up from poverty to amazing wealth, and a man of the people. Was that appreciated by the people in Congress? Was that your impression? Or did people just see the guy with the elegant clothes, and the sexy scarf, and all that?

White: He was such an intelligent person, and such an intelligent speaker, that when he went to champion some cause, he certainly must have been appreciated by the people that were also on the side of that cause. He was very friendly with Marion Javits and her husband [Senator] Jacob [K.] Javits. There, I'm sure, were political connections through them.



Marion Javits and Rauschenberg after the presidential signing of the bill establishing the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Washington, D.C., September 29, 1964. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Is the Foundation active in any way in trying to advocate for state support for the arts? Did the Foundation in any way oppose these cuts that are now going through Congress? The NEH? Is the Foundation as politically active as Bob Rauschenberg was?

White: I'm not sure, not being a Foundation member. I'm an employee of the Foundation. I'm more involved with the art part of it than the—

Q: But you don't see evidence of that.

White: No, and it may be one of those things that is not possible legally. I'm not sure. They certainly try to support causes that Bob Rauschenberg found dear. But I can't think immediately if, "Oh yes they sent money to X, or—"

Q: He had a problem at UT [University of Texas] because he wouldn't dissect a frog?

White: So the story goes.

Q: So the story goes. That's another print-the-legend moment, maybe.

White: Except that thing I mentioned about the discord with his father; the father being an avid hunter and Bob not wanting to do that. I don't have any reason to doubt that idea that he didn't want to dissect a frog.

Q: A frog, but he was okay with annoying fish. Was he a catch-and-release?

White: He was not a vegetarian as far as his eating either.

Q: Was he catch-and-release?

White: Catch-and-eat.

Q: Catch-and-eat, okay. Interesting.

Just a little housekeeping too on a couple of points which we haven't addressed, or hadn't addressed in our prior conversation. He was in World War II, but he was a conscientious objector?

White: No he was—

Q: He was in the Army.

White: He was in the Navy.

Q: In the Navy. Of course, because he was stationed in San Diego and worked in a hospital. But he objected to killing.

White: Right. I don't know if it was ever a case where someone handed him a gun and said, "You have to go out and do the thing." Or he ended up being involved in hospital work in the Navy. So maybe he said, "I don't want to do that."

Q: He sought service in a way that wouldn't require him to kill people. I know this is a bit of a stretch, but did he ever identify with Walt Whitman, who was an orderly in a hospital during the Civil War?

White: I never heard of that.

Q: It was just an idea I had. I thought, there are certain ways in which artists might look at someone as a kindred spirit. Dealing with the horrors of wars through a hospital ward would be a shared experience.

White: Well he might well have.

Q: But he never?

White: He spoke of his heroes being the [Orville and Wilbur] Wright brothers and Gertrude Stein.

Q: Why the Wright brothers?

White: Well, they turned a bicycle into an airplane.

[Laughter]

White: A lot of his interests and dreams seemed to be about travel, and moving, and flight. The imagery in his artwork is very often wheels, and birds, and train tracks, and all kinds of things to do with movement. The whole thing with space travel and his involvement with all his art he did at the time he was commissioned by the government agency to go view one of those launches

from Cape Canaveral [Florida]. And then he did a whole series called the *Stoned Moon prints* [1969–70] that came about from imagery that was supplied by them.

Q: So it was an Apollo era?

White: Right. He was very fascinated by all that and just thrilled with the notion of the inventiveness, the exploration.

Q: I wondered if he owned a bicycle as a child.

White: I think there may be a picture as a very young kid with a little tricycle. There are pictures of him as a grown man on a bicycle at Gemini.

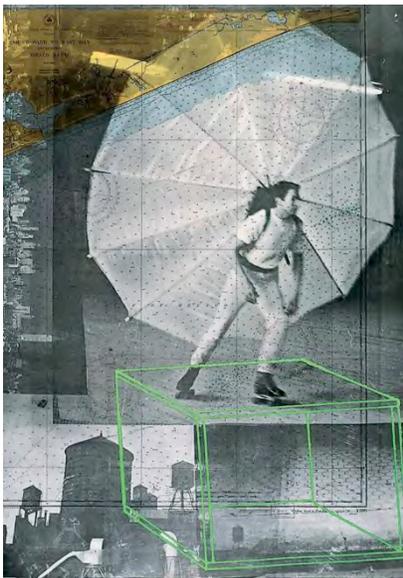


Left: Robert Rauschenberg
Sky Garden (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph and screenprint
89 1/4 x 42 inches (226.7 x 106.7 cm)
From an edition of 35,
published by Gemini
G.E.L., Los Angeles

Right: Rauschenberg
during a break for the
proofing session for *Stoned Moon*
lithograph series
(1969–70), Gemini G.E.L.
parking lot, Los Angeles,
1969. Photo: Sidney B.
Felsen

Q: Your comment about Orville and Wilbur, I was just wondering again if this was perhaps the Depression era kid on the bicycle imagining the freedom of the skies. Or being able to escape from the confines of a challenging home life.

White: Very likely. One of his most well-known performance pieces is called *Pelican* [1963]. He's on roller skates, and on his back is a parachute, so it's all about this movement. It's very, very compelling imagery to watch.



Robert Rauschenberg
Autobiography, 1968 (detail showing
Rauschenberg in *Pelican*)
Offset lithograph on three sheets of paper
198 3/4 x 48 3/4 inches (504.8 x 123.8 cm)
overall
From an edition of 2000, published by
Broadside Art, Inc., New York

Q: He would've been the right age, little bit young maybe, to get excited about [Charles A.] Lindbergh. But certainly people like Will Rogers and Amelia Earhart, who were both lost, but perhaps they're still alive out there somewhere.

White: That's a nice notion.

Q: I want to explore, also, some of his personal relationships and how you might have intersected with them, or been involved in interlocking circles of conversation or friendship with people like John Cage, Jasper Johns, or Merce —

White: Cunningham.

Q: —Cunningham. Allan Kaprow, was he still a friend of—?

White: Actually that's a person I never met.

Q: Was that an earlier?

White: I guess so, yes.

Q: He was a very involved, as you know, with the early Happenings, and Red Grooms and Claes Oldenburg. Was Bob Rauschenberg ever involved with either of them in a social way, or professional way?

White: I think he took part. There's a series of—I guess they're both Happenings. *The Construction of Boston* is one of them that Bob participated in. I'm not sure who was the organizer of that event. But Henry Geldzahler was there, and I believe Frank Stella.

[Note: *The Construction of Boston* performed at the Maidman Playhouse, New York, was directed by Cunningham. Rauschenberg was among the performers and Geldzahler and Stella made appearances.]

Q: What year was that, do you recall? Eighties? [1962]

White: No, much earlier. It was in the early sixties, I think. So he was very involved in group activities, and certainly Judson [Dance] Theater, the Judson dance thing.

Q: Obviously, he had to have known all these people. I'm just wondering if he continued an acquaintance with people like Oldenburg, or Grooms?

White: I think once he moved to Captiva or the artists in general got more well-to-do and dispersed from being so close together, physically, in Manhattan—I think he was closest with Roy Lichtenstein, who had a house on Captiva. Although he was not there a lot of the year, but they certainly saw each other when he was in Captiva. He was particularly close to [James] Jim Rosenquist, and saw a lot of him.



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

Q: Just up the coast in Aripeka [Florida] and as I gather, he is not going to be able to rebuild there because of some EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] regulations. Did he have a lot of contact with people like Robert [S. F. “Bob”] Hughes? I read that they were friends.

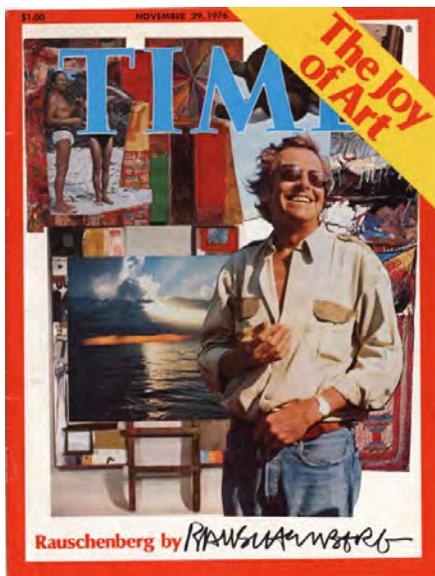
White: They were good friends, and Bob Hughes wrote very enthusiastically about Rauschenberg’s work. At one point, Hughes had had some sort of operation on his throat, or voice box. He was not supposed to talk, and so he decided to go down to stay in Captiva to get away from a lot of people. But Bob Rauschenberg said every time Bob Hughes walked into the room and saw Bob Rauschenberg, he’d start talking, just because he was so full of energy and thoughts and wanted to say things.

Q: They were two people who certainly shared appetite for ardent spirits.

White: Yes, exactly. I think they enjoyed each other’s company a lot.

Q: It was sad to see that Hughes just recently passed away. He was a tremendous writer. I think a lot of people admired him enormously. How did they get to know each other? Or how'd they become friends?

White: I don't know how that started. I know Bob Hughes wrote the major piece about Rauschenberg at the time of his retrospective at the National Collection of Fine Arts—I think it was called at the time—in Washington, D.C. in 1976, when he was considered the bicentennial artist. Bob was on the cover of *Time* magazine, which was the first time I think a living artist had been on the cover of the magazine. So I don't know if they'd known one another a long time before that, but certainly they must have had a lot of connection at that moment just to bring that article about.



Robert Rauschenberg
Cover for *Time* magazine—November
29, 1976
10 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches (27.3 x 21 cm)

Q: That's now called the national museum of American art [Smithsonian American Art Museum]. It was at that time called the NCFA, the National Collection of Fine Arts. Changing the names of all these agencies.

What about John Cage and Merce Cunningham? Were they often at Captiva? Did they maintain a friendship the way they had enjoyed earlier?

White: Bob had been the artistic director, I guess it was called, of the Cunningham Company at one point. There was a falling out at the time of Rauschenberg's being given the grand prize at the Venice Biennale in the early sixties, whatever year that was [1964]. I think the spotlight was so much on Bob, although he was traveling with the Cunningham Company on their world tour, that there was an animosity.

Q: Jealousy.

White: Yes, and so I'm not sure exactly how it happened—if Bob said, "I'm leaving," or they said, "We want you to leave." In any case, there was a falling out and a separation that continued for quite some time, into the seventies. Merce Cunningham did a piece, I think *Travelogue* [1977] is the name of the piece, and Bob was asked to design the set and the costume, which he did spectacularly. So they certainly must have been aware of what the other ones were doing, even if they weren't on the phone or seeing one another in person. That seemed to be some sort of reconciliation.

And certainly later in life, they saw more of one another, and both Bob Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham ended up in wheelchairs and incapacitated physically. Merce seemed to be the only person that could tell Bob, “Now you’ve got to get exercise.” If anyone else tried to do it, it didn’t seem to work as well. Not that Bob jumped up and started exercising, but Merce was in the best position as an equal on lots of levels—equally incapacitated—to talk to him about it.



Merce Cunningham, Robert Hughes, and Rauschenberg at Pace Gallery warehouse, selecting works for *Robert Rauschenberg: Synapsis Shuffle*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2000. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: One of the Olympians of his age, and could basically speak to him as a peer.

White: Right. And John Cage, who Bob may have seen less of. But John and Bob had an enormous respect and love for one another. Cage said his *4'33"* [1952] piano piece came after Bob’s *White Paintings* [1951]. Bob quoted John as saying, “Our thinking is so much alike there need have been only one of us.”

One time we were in Washington, D.C. where Trisha Brown [Dance] Company was performing in connection with a Rauschenberg exhibition at the National Gallery. There was a stage set up on the sidewalk outside the museum, and the audience sat on the steps going up to the entrance to the museum, with their backs to the museum, and watched this performance. The music was by John Cage, so there was a get-together in the hotel room prior to the event. John Cage was there. That's one of the few times I remember seeing them together. John would say something brilliant and funny, and Bob was like an adoring school kid that turned to the rest of us and said, "Did you hear what he said? Did you hear that?" He was so taken by every word out of his mouth, and rightly so. But it was interesting to see Bob behaving that way.

[Note: Trisha Brown Dance Company performed *Astral Converted (50")*, for which Rauschenberg did the stage design, in 1991 at the time of Rauschenberg's *ROCI USA* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art].

Q: Atypical.

White: Yes. There were not a lot of people that he seemed so completely overwhelmed by, practically. That's the wrong word.

Q: I never had the privilege or the pleasure of his company, but from how you've portrayed him over the last two days, he seems like a very larger-than-life character. Very outspoken, very charming, a big personality, and certainly the center of attention wherever he was.

White: That was most often the case. It was interesting to be around in a situation where you—
As I said, he wasn't in New York a lot, but he would come up sometimes and be here for a week.
There'd be late parties and a lot of drinking, so the following morning Bob would be in bad
hangover shape. You'd know an interview was coming up in a matter of minutes, and you'd
think, "Oh my god, how is this going to happen?" The doorbell would ring and the person would
come in, and he was like one of those time-lapse photographs of a flower unfolding. All of a
sudden, he would just burst into his public mode and transform himself.

Q: So he had great self-control and great mastery over the moment, as he needed to meet it.
That's a wonderful story. We could ask about a few other people—Clyfford Still?

White: I'm not aware of any connection.

Q: That was an earlier. And I guess Cy Twombly was in Rome. But did they maintain a
friendship over the years?

White: They did. Very often when Cy would come to New York, he would stay here in this
house and be around Bob. Then as Twombly became more renowned and sought after, then he
tended to stay in hotels or other places. But they still had affection for one another and were both
asking what the other one was up to even if they didn't see each other a lot.

Q: Interestingly, Twombly, as I understand, returned to Virginia eventually.

White: He bought a house in Lexington, where he had been from.

Q: It's a beautiful place. A beautiful town, a beautiful part of the country.

White: There was an unfortunate incident where—Cy used to come to Captiva and visit for a while too, and stay. There are multiple houses, so he could stay. He worked there as well, on his own artwork. Then at one point, there was some sort of suggestion where Bob invited Cy to come to a Thanksgiving dinner, and Cy said yes. But this was some time in advance, and I don't know what happened—if Cy forgot. In any case, Bob was making all these preparations and Cy never showed up. That really hurt Bob a lot, and he kind of backed off at that point.



Cy Twombly in Captiva, Florida, 1976.
Documentary photo: Robert
Rauschenberg

Q: So that was the end of the friendship, or just cooling?

White: In one sense the end, as far as seeing one another physically, although there were still occasional correspondences. Cy sent some beautiful pictures that he had taken of Bob from way back when.

Q: Other acquaintances, did he know Joseph Cornell at all? Did he have any interactions with him? Or Howard Hussey?

White: Joseph Cornell, I believe I've read. I don't remember Bob speaking about Cornell particularly. I read in some of the chronologies about his taking things either to the studio or picking up things from the studio. I'm not sure what the context was.

Q: We're probably had a look at the same sources. But there was no contact with Cornell or the estate of Cornell?

White: No, nor did he own any work of Cornell's, which is interesting since he owned so much art by so many other people.

Q: This raises a question.

White: I never thought about that before.

Q: Yes, interesting. So he owned, he collected a lot of work by others.

White: Right.

Q: He seemed to like Cornell's work, but he didn't have any examples of it.

White: I don't believe he had any. If he did, it would've been a very modest collage or something like that. But I don't recall if he had any.

Q: Raises a question about the role you played as the registrar and keeper of the records. Is there art by others in a ring binder? Have you explored that?

White: Oh yes. A lot of the things had been acquired before I started working for Bob. There seem to be all of these folders full of clippings and stuff to do with exhibitions and announcements, and a lot of paper trail. Often there's not much information about where something came from, if it was a gift of the artist or a purchase. And if it was a purchase, how much was paid for it, or where it was purchased. That didn't seem to interest him or, for whatever reason, there don't seem to be records. Because there was this exhibition just within the last year or two at Gagosian called *The Private Collection of Robert Rauschenberg* [2011], and we were trying to put together information about provenance and where these works had come from. It was very hard in lots of cases to get any information.

Q: Like what we were speaking about yesterday, having to go back and look at checklists of exhibitions and compare them against installation photos or snaps at the opening, and see if you

can actually find the works that were on the checklist were in the show, and a lot of them actually weren't.

Other writers he knew, Leo Steinberg?

White: Leo Steinberg wrote about him, so he well may have interviewed him.

Q: Perhaps. I'm curious. There are two areas where I have questions. A lot of the people we're speaking about are men. Was he friendly with any women artists?

White: He had been a student at Black Mountain with Dorothea Rockburne, and then she had worked for him at one point. Certainly women artists in the performance arts, like Trisha Brown was one of his very closest friends.

Q: And Yvonne Rainer.

White: And Carolyn Brown, and Yvonne Rainer, and [Deborah] Debbie Hay, and all the dancers with the Merce Cunningham company.

Q: But women in the visual arts?

White: He was very good friends with, at one point, Elaine Sturtevant, who then I think moved to France. I don't think there was so much contact, but she was around a lot at one point.

Q: I'm just curious which women artists might have been on the Captiva circuit, were occasional guests at his home. Anyone of close acquaintance?

White: I don't recall other than Trisha Brown being there when I was there, which is not to say— That would be a good question for Laury Getford, for example. Who as I said, was in Captiva working with Bob.



Trisha Brown at Rauschenberg's Gulf House, Captiva, Florida, 2007. Photo: Laurence Getford

Q: There were a couple of artists you mentioned, or individuals I should say. One of them, Robert Patterson—

White: Petersen.

Q: Pardon me, Petersen. What can you share about Robert ["Bob"] Petersen?

White: He was a printer at Gemini when Rauschenberg went out to work maybe on his first series of prints. I'm not sure which ones [*Booster* and *7 Studies*, 1967]. They certainly connected, and Bob Petersen came back and lived in Captiva with Bob for a number of years. So they were very, very, very closely connected. I don't know if I mentioned how Bob often seemed to pick up on the strengths of people around him, as when he had a studio assistant who was very good at carpentry and cabinet work, he did a series of paintings called *Spreads* [1975–83] and *Scales* [1977–81] that were very elaborately constructed, thanks to him. At the same time, when Petersen came he got particularly involved in printmaking. In fact he started something called Untitled Press [Inc., established in 1971], where they invited artists down—Cy Twombly, Brice Marden, [Robert] Bob Whitman—to make prints at the print shop in Captiva. His ex-wife [Susan] Sue Weil. That in part was probably because of Bob Petersen's involvement in printmaking.

Q: How long was he there? I know now he lives in Tivoli, New York.

White: Actually I'm not sure when he moved away from Captiva. I'm so bad about dates.

Q: Don't worry about the dates.

White: That kind of thing is easy to find out. He was there for certainly a number of years. It wasn't just for a weekend or anything like that. [Note: Petersen lived in Captiva from 1970 to 1980.]

Q: No, that's clear.

White: He was very much a part of the activities of Captiva. As you'll see, if you'll look at his artwork, the immersion in the life—Bob's life and in his life—and a record of who came to visit, and what was going on. They're very, very interesting, as well as being handsome works to look at too. They're wonderful.

Q: Would you call him a protégé of Bob's? Was the relationship also one of a mentor and a protégé?

White: I think it was an intimate, personal relationship where Petersen had his own— There was a small shed on the property that was his studio and he was making his own art all along. He traveled with Bob when Bob went on to other places for exhibitions or whatever.

Q: As a companion but—

White: More than a protégé. Companion is a better word.

Q: Did Bob Rauschenberg have, apart from his studio assistants, people whom you would characterize as protégés? Did he take particular special interest in younger artists, individuals?

White: I think it was most apt to be people that were around him. The instances that come to mind are people that worked for him, and with him, and he was very supportive of their own art-making work.

Q: I'm imagining that there was a generation of younger artists who might have been influenced by him, known about him, been inspired by him. I know that Bob Rauschenberg was also very interested in AIDS research and fighting that illness that swept over everyone in the early eighties. But I'm wondering about whether or not he had any kind of a relationship in the sense of being interested in the careers and wellbeing of artists like Keith Haring or David Wojnarowicz or Jean-Michel Basquiat, who lived around the corner, and—

White: Not in the way Warhol did.

Q: —Frank [James] Moore, people whose careers became linked with AIDS.

White: Not so much. He was very supportive of amfAR [American Foundation for AIDS Research] and always donated things, and went to activities, and spoke publicly about it. But I don't think there was necessarily a connection with other artists whose work was focused in that way.

Q: Who, I think, being young and having to deal with this medical reality, it was inescapable that it would somehow enter the narrative of their work.

White: Sure.

Q: Whereas Bob Rauschenberg, the work was the work and the lifestyle was the lifestyle. You wouldn't walk into a museum exhibition and feel in any way that his work was informed by the narrative of his own preferences, in terms of how he wanted to live.

White: Right.

Q: But I'm curious how he regarded the art that came out of all of that. Whether—

White: It's rare that I was with him where he was talking about other younger artists' work.

When he was in town, I was here working. It all had to do with work. Often, at the end of the day, I was just as happy to leave the office. Whereas many people would have thought, "Oh my goodness here's a chance to sit with Bob Rauschenberg." If I hadn't already been there for eight hours or whatever. Maybe I missed a lot more opportunities to find out a lot more stuff.

Q: It was your day job. The end of the day, right? It was your day job and you had your life?

White: Right. Which is not to say that there weren't times when one stayed for dinner, and then there were parties, and lots of other things too. But it wasn't the nightly— There were periods earlier on before I worked for Bob, when there was an—what's the word? You used it before.

Q: Entourage.

White: —entourage, that were kind of nightly.

Q: His posse, as we would say today. What was his relationship with David Whitney?

White: I think they both were very intrigued with one another, and interested, and liked one another, and respected one another. David was here from time to time. He was not part of an entourage, because he had his own life and was doing other things. But David was very intelligent, very outspoken. I think Bob certainly—

Q: Admired that.

White: —admired that greatly in David. Owned Rauschenberg artwork. So it was a good relationship.

Q: How well acquainted were Bob Rauschenberg and Philip Johnson?

White: I don't know if that came about through David, or Bob had met him earlier on, but it was—I think they moved in different circles for the most part, so I don't know how often they even ran into each other at parties.

Q: Cordial?

White: It certainly would have been cordial in every way.

Q: But not a person with whom ideas were exchanged?

White: No. I know Philip owned an early painting of the Combine period. He probably bought it from Castelli, I imagine. He was certainly interested in Bob's work, and one of the major early Combines at the Museum of Modern Art was purchased by Philip for the museum. I think it was at the request of Alfred [H.] Barr [Jr.], called *First Landing Jump* [1961]. So Philip was certainly sympathetic to the work.



Robert Rauschenberg
First Landing Jump, 1961
Combine: oil, cloth, metal, leather, electric
fixture, and cable on composition board with
automobile tire and wood plank
89 1/8 x 72 x 8 7/8 inches (226.4 x 182.9 x
22.5 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Philip Johnson

Q: Could we speak a little bit about Don Saff? You alluded to him yesterday. I think we'll be interviewing him as well, as I will also be interviewing Robert Petersen. What can you share about Don Saff?

White: I believe they first met when Don Saff was in Florida at the University of South Florida, Tampa, at Graphicstudio—the print publication at the museum—at the university. I assume he invited Bob Rauschenberg to come down and make something. There was a real rapport in their thinking and their personalities, and so over the years they worked together a lot.

Q: What, of the projects they worked on, were you part of?

White: I was never involved in any of the actual being in the studio when the works were being made. Don was very much a trusted advisor to Bob. When the ROCI tour got going, Don was the overseer of the whole tour. I don't know if it had an official title. But Bob trusted his suggestions, his judgment. We were very much involved just because of what Bob was up to, and Don was involved with it, and so I was involved with it. Then at one point, when Bob was showing at Knoedler Gallery [New York], Don Saff was part of the Knoedler Gallery staff. Probably hired because of Bob. Then we worked very closely to do with gallery exhibitions, and I'm still close with Don and see him as much as possible.

Q: Yes, he lives down on the eastern shore of Maryland now, which is a lovely place to be. So it's not Captiva, but not unlike, in terms of—

White: It's at the water's edge—

Q: —at the water's edge, yes.

White: So they had that in common. And I think Don had a very inventive, unorthodox approach to the kind of editioned work he published. It was very rarely just a work on paper, it was often very complex in how it came about. And I think Bob was intrigued and interested and happy to be part of experimenting with new ways of doing something, or using new materials that hadn't been used before. So there was a real rapport in their attitudes.

Q: Speak to that a little bit, about what it was that you would characterize as Don Saff's unique approach that appealed to Bob Rauschenberg. His use of materials?

White: Yes, I think one of the early projects had to do with publishing works that initially looked like flattened cardboard cartons that would get hung on the wall, but in fact, they were made of clay [*Tampa Clay Pieces*, 1972–73]. To bring that about was complex and interesting. And there were a series of prints on paper that were published at the same time. Again having to do with images of cardboard and flattened boxes.



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

Q: Was it kind of trompe l'oeil?

White: In a sense, although sometimes they were printed in bright blue or something, so it didn't necessarily fool. The clay things maybe were more trompe l'oeil at first glance, although, when you looked at a second glance—

Q: Did they continue to work together?

White: Yes, one of the later projects was *Eco-Echo* [1992–93]. It had to do with these windmill-like constructions, where images were silk-screened on the blades of a windmill, and there was this sensor that had to do with proximity to the piece. So the closer a person, the viewer, approached the work, that activated the movement of the windmill. Very much a viewer involvement in the piece, and not a static thing to look at. Things that Bob was always interested in. I think it was very complex to bring these things about.



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

Q: I understand that one of the missions of the Foundation is ecological and environmental. How did Bob Rauschenberg become interested in that? You shared that he had an herb garden at the bottom of the steps outside his kitchen and that he liked wild, tropical flora. But how did he get involved in issues pertaining to environment?

White: I guess it was his love of nature from his youth, not wanting to dissect a frog. He talks about picking Captiva as the place to live because he went there once and a whole flock of butterflies landed on him—some such story.

Q: Really, is that why he moved there?

White: One of the stories was something of that sort.

Q: Tell it, tell that story.

White: It had to do with a flock of butterflies, but I don't remember if he saw them go past, or they landed in front of him, or they were all reflected in a puddle of water. It was something incredibly beautiful to look at, and just nature in its glory. In Captiva, there's a large part which is called the [J. N.] Ding Darling [National Wildlife Refuge] bird sanctuary, and so lots of very exotic tropical birds pass through or live there. And the foliage of the mangroves and the sea. It's a very beautiful environment. So Bob loved this and bemoaned when it was being bulldozed for another development of apartments or houses. It was just his love of nature.

Q: Definitely what you're speaking of happened in places like Sanibel that became much more touristy. But what you're describing, the butterflies, the flora, the waterside paradise, stands in stark contrast to my image of 1930s Port Arthur, Texas.

White: He speaks very disparagingly of that too, of the smell from there, the gas refineries.

Q: Interesting. That's exactly what I was imagining.

White: Actually, when you spoke of his father being involved in the oil business, I think his father was in the telephone lineman, so I don't think he was in the—

Q: They were in an oil town.

White: — But Bob was in the midst, you could not avoid—just the minute you stepped outside and took a breath, you knew where you were.

Q: Right, so he grew up with a stench of petroleum and this idea of the rape of nature going on. It absolutely makes sense that he would be attracted to this environment where none of that was present. Except maybe occasionally drifting over the water, you would get a little diesel exhaust from some passing yacht, right?

White: But very, very, very infrequently.

Q: He must have been very involved in the local politics.

White: Oh, yes. Beach refurbishment and that sort of thing. After I think it was called Hurricane Charley [2004], a number of years ago, pretty much the eye of it came right over Captiva and devastated the island. He owned one of the last large hunks of undeveloped land on Captiva and spent a lot of time and money replanting things after it was ravaged by the hurricane.

Q: Is that land now going to be kept in a natural state perpetually?

White: I think that's the plan. The Foundation runs this artist residency on the Captiva property that mainly has to do with the existing buildings, where visiting artists come and live in some, and eat in others, and have others for studio space. But I don't think there's certainly any plan to develop what's referred to as "the jungle."

Q: They refer to it as “the jungle”? Or he referred to it?

White: Bob had a road cut through it. To go down the Jungle Road, it's quite a—particularly at night with the spiders around and whatever else.

Q: Reptiles.

White: Yes, there's a lot of—

Q: Perilous wildlife. In other words, the goal, the idea is to continue the human traffic of creative people coming to stay there and drink in the inspiration that nature provides, the way he did.

White: Right. Also, I think possibly to use it— It's really just finishing its first year. So it is its pilot year of residency. Although so far, the feedback is the artists have been completely pleased and said they've never had situations like this, where they didn't have to worry about their day-to-day food or whatever, and could just concentrate on their art-making. But there's also the notion of get-togethers of environmental groups talking about problems to do with pollution, for example, and what can they do about it. It's not necessarily only visual or performance artists.

Q: Was he active in any environmental initiatives outside of the Captiva area? Like, in New York, did he get involved in the oyster beds off of Red Hook or anything like that?

White: Not those that I'm aware of. But I'm sure there must be some posters that have to do with— There were big placards on the sides of buses at one point that had to do with the disappearing ozone layer, that Bob designed. He was very involved in all manner of protecting the environment.

Q: He would raise money by giving fundraising materials to these causes?

White: Yes, more often than not, rather than handing over money, although he certainly was generous with his money as well. But if his art-making could be used in some way to further a cause, then he doubly loved it; because it was helping the cause and he loved making the art.

Q: Was he inspired artistically by the idea that what he would make would help other people?

White: I think so, yes. He did various things for the UN [United Nations] to do with population control.

Q: Now, this was one individual, right? You're not talking about half a dozen people.

[Laughter]

White: One individual. It's hard to imagine when you look around here, what he has wrought.

Q: Another housekeeping question about registry and archives. If a researcher wants to come to you and get access to the ring binders, or the computer files, or the library, how would they go about that? What's the procedure?

White: It usually starts with a letter or an email or a phone call saying, "I'm working on my PhD and I'm focusing on Bob's involvement with nature," whatever they say. Then, "Can we come and do some research?" That's how it starts, usually.

Q: The request, is that approved by you? Or is there some kind of a committee action that's required? Or a review board?

White: It wasn't ever that way in the past. Basically, we were a busy office working on day-to-day stuff, so to have people come in is always disruptive in one sense. At the same time, often very good doctoral theses would emerge because of people doing research, so to say no just because it was a busy time was not necessary the right answer, too.

Q: That's also useful to what you're doing. Because if someone, let's say, is doing a PhD, that's going to require them to try to justify or align the checklist at the ROCI exhibitions and installation photographs that might exist around the globe, you're not going to want to do that yourself. So if a person who's working on a doctoral thesis finds that that's part of their task, then that gives you information.

White: Oh in every case, all those things that you might say start out as interruptions end up being wonderful contributions to our knowledge.

Q: In the future, once all of the renovations are done, is there going to be a space here dedicated to researchers?

White: Yes I believe so. To scholarly research, where people can come. The notion and the hope is to get more and more stuff online or on the website. So people can see it on the screen without having to come and pore through boxes of stuff, if it's been sorted through and organized.

Q: So this was ongoing from the time you came here.

White: Right, people have always—

Q: Not just posthumously. People were asking, basically, to look at your books from the beginning of your—

White: I've got letters now saying, "Oh remember twenty years ago I came and I was a student at such-and-such, and now I'm the director at the such-and-such."

Q: Right, and you say, "Of course I'd love to see you again." That's great. Another thing we didn't really explore closely— We did talk about how the ring binders overlapped and continued during the period of moving the system into a computerized database. And that only in year 2000

did you abandon the simultaneous filing system. When you began actually logging things in electronic form, what kind of a set-up did you have? Did you have to bring people in to teach everybody, to give you tutorials? Or were you hiring people who were—

White: No, I think it was done by staff people here. It was something that I wasn't necessarily sitting down at a keyboard and doing myself.

Q: Right, you're not doing clerical work. You're managing the overall tasks, the strategic operations and the actual—

White: It was more in-house among people working here, rather than hiring the big firm that turns this into this.

Q: But have you any recollection of what kind of computer? Let's say, was it a Mac system? Was it a PC? Did you go from one to the other?

White: I can't tell you any of that stuff, I'm sorry to say.

Q: But were there people hired to come in to give the staff tutorials? Or were you hiring people who already knew how to work with computers?

White: I just picked up stuff from other people in the office. Thomas Buehler is quite knowledgeable about computers. He was helpful, as was anyone that did it. I would say, “How do I deal with this or that?” Just picking up little things here and there.

Q: It’s interesting, because here’s this meticulous organization of vast quantities of data, and I don’t find anyone involved with its handling who has a Master of Library Science or anything. It’s like you’re coming at it from the gallery world, and the development of native intelligence into expertise. It seems like that that’s how the whole organization—

White: That’s more the way it is with the rest of us. I think one of the women who started out as an intern, who is now an employee, was taking a course in—I’m not even sure what the course is—but she goes off to a thing to do with archiving.

Q: Obviously there are a lot of opportunities to study these things and to—

White: The archivist from the Menil Collection was invited to come up and spend two days, just seeing what we had and advising us how to deal with things. What to do and what not to do. Like, “Get those rubber bands off those things because they’re in a—.” Really straightforward ABC kind of stuff. She’s brilliant in the way she’s handled the archives at the Menil, I understand. She was wonderful and full of information.

Q: What was her background?

White: I think she's self-taught.

Q: Do you recall her name?

White: I don't.

Q: Okay that's another piece of research we can do post-facto. What inspired the visit?

White: I think Susan Davidson, who had worked at the Menil Collection in Houston and who was a curator of the Rauschenberg retrospective in '97 and a Foundation board member— Her name is [Geraldine] Geri [Aramanda]. She was the one that said, "Oh, Geri should come up and talk to us."

Q: So she basically did an evaluation based on a site visit?

White: Right, and a recommendation.

Q: And made certain suggestions, how you could be more mainstream, or improve your operations.

White: You find out practically everything you're doing is not archivally correct, as far as the file folders are wrong, the shelves are wrong—it should be metal or it should be plastic—every

single thing. Off gases and all this kind of stuff, if you're really trying to save something for the long haul.

Q: What would Bob Rauschenberg say, apropos to his Scotch tape comment? Archives perhaps fall under a different set of priorities.

White: Apparently once—not apparently—he had been asked repeatedly by a woman named Carol Mancusi-Ungaro—who was a conservator, again at the Menil Collection originally, and she's since been involved with the Whitney Museum and Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]—to speak to him on recording or video about conservation and his thoughts about it. He continually resisted talking with her, and it never came about.

Q: That's a pity.

White: Very much so.

Q: That's a pity. But I think, with things like analog, photography, paper—obviously, probably a lot of the paper that you were using for the ring binders. Or the plastic sheets, they're all highly acidic and highly impermanent, so I guess that adds to the need to accelerate the whole scanning into electronic format.

White: When you see things that got Xeroxed not so many years ago, and they're already fading away so you can barely see them.

Q: Faxes too. You were talking about how a lot of the documents that were traveling between New York and Florida were faxes. And if it's the old heat fax with the paper roll, those things are probably invisible by now.

White: And then the early Polaroid photographs where you took that little sponge like thing and gave them a streak of preservative, or something like that.

Q: The swinger camera, right?

White: Bob was not against replacing an early technology with a later technology if the presentation, or the result, was the same. I can't think of a specific example, but I think the backdrop for this Trisha Brown set that I was speaking of earlier, where he did the costumes, were photographs that were in a slide format that were projected on the back wall of the theater with four projectors. Then they simultaneously all shifted one position to the right, and a new one was added. I think they finally found a better way than old-fashioned slide projectors. So he didn't object, because when you sat in the audience and looked at this thing on the stage, the look was the same. I think there was even some notion that there was this click of the slide projector was still preserved in some fashion.



Set, costumes, and lighting by Rauschenberg for Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Glacial Decoy* (1979). Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: © Babette Mangolte

Q: That's interesting.

White: I believe that's the case.

Q: The sort of audio [imitates sound] it's like the ding of a typewriter. There are a number of things like that. With the telephones, the idea of the ringing of the phone, or certain audio consequences of analog technology that have been carried into the new technology. The young people don't know where they came from. The sound of typewriter keys, [they're] like, "What's that sound?" That's some kind of weird percussion instrument.

White: I heard somebody was shown a clothespin and said, "What's that?"

[Laughter]

Q: Ask Claes Oldenburg. What do you think Bob Rauschenberg would say about the computer technology now, like iPads and—[David] Hockney does a lot of work on his iPad. He's turned it into a sketchbook. How did he feel about the virtual environment of electronic imaging?

White: He embraced it in one sense in that in Captiva the imagery when he took a photograph, they used, I think it was called an Iris printer—I'm not even sure of what the terminology of these different things—

Q: I'm a Luddite, too, don't worry.

White: —could blow up to any scale, in any color. The image came across by inkjets releasing ink on a big revolving drum, so you ended up with a very large-scale image, which would then be used for the transfer to the actual surface of the painting. Which was a variation on the early things where we were taking a picture out of a magazine and putting it down, and putting lighter fluid on the back, and rubbing to release the inks. So it was a continuation of what he was doing all along, but this was a newer way to do that and a way to use his own photographs at any scale he wanted. He was very happy to use all that stuff. He didn't do any video work, as far as— He covered all kinds of mediums as far as painting, sculpture, drawings, performance, and—

Q: Film?

White: He did very, very few. One or two film things early on, where it had to do with more editing and clipping and splicing. That's something he didn't pursue so much, which is interesting.

Q: A little bit like Warhol, with a Super 8 or a 16-millimeter camera?

White: Warhol embraced film gigantically.

Q: But early on, he was working with very low-tech media. Eventually obviously, masterpieces like *Chelsea Girls* [1966] and *Dracula* [1974]. How did Bob Rauschenberg interact with Andy Warhol?

White: I think they very, very much liked each other. They didn't see each other a lot, but they did see each other from time to time. I knew Warhol a bit through David Whitney before I worked for Bob, and worked there briefly. Andy would say, "Bob's my favorite artist—after Walt Disney." I mentioned this to Jim Rosenquist's wife, Mimi Thompson and she said, "He said the same thing to me about Jim."

[Laughter]

White: Andy was a funny, tricky guy.

Q: He really thought the world of Walt Disney.

White: Yes, but he and Bob traded artworks. If you read those Warhol diaries, where he's talking to other people about Rauschenberg, he's saying incredibly positive things. I think Bob Hughes, for some reason, missed the point about Warhol. I know Bob Rauschenberg would defend and try to convince Hughes that Warhol was this extraordinarily good artist. Bob wrote, maybe at the time of Warhol's death, he was asked to comment on his death. There's a brilliant piece that he wrote about Warhol, which you should read. It's in the files. ["Note on Andy Warhol," July 8, 1988, Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Published in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, edited by Kynaston McShine, p. 429. Exh. cat. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989.]

Q: We can find it. There was a well-known exchange recorded between Warhol and Johns that was far from friendly.

White: Oh really?

Q: Yes, I just remembered that.

White: That was done in an interview situation?

Q: No, it was—I'd have to research that. But there was a particularly, I wouldn't say combative, but I would certainly say—and I wouldn't say vitriolic, but—barbed with sarcasm and so forth.

White: Although Andy liked Jasper's work as well, and bought some. I happened to be—

Q: Well, friends fight.

White: —that's true—next to Warhol at the opening of the Johns retrospective that David Whitney curated at the Whitney Museum. He said, "If we'd bought some of these before, we'd be on Easy Street now."

[Laughter]

White: His expressions were just so funny.

Q: Making every dollar holler. Right?

[Pauses] We've covered a great deal of material and a lot of ground. I was wondering for the moment, if there's anything that you can anticipate is going to be an *esprit de l'escalier* when we walk out of the elevator. "Oh, I wish I had said that." If anything comes to mind.

White: Wait until I get in the elevator. I don't think at the moment if— There just seem to be endless— Your prompting brings lots of thoughts about stuff that I don't necessarily think of.

Q: It's all about telling stories, and you're telling us stories. And we're trying to use your stories to build the bones of another story that will connect or end up in dialogue with the story that I'm going to harvest from Robert Petersen or Don Saff.

White: Right, exactly. They all have other stories and other takes and it will all—

Q: So if we're to close the interview shortly, a good question would be: David White, in a few words, how do you feel that knowing Bob Rauschenberg has helped shape your life? What's he meant to you?

White: It shaped it extraordinarily. Just—

Q: Apart from the employment, apart from the trajectory of your career, apart from—just on a really deep level, what did the guy mean to you? What do you really value about your friendship?

White: The visual part, from being so connected with his art, and seeing his connection with things. When one leaves the office and goes out on the street and one is continually confronted by these similarities, of this cacophony of visual stimulations that are seemingly unrelated. Or maybe unrelated, or maybe related in some strange way. I'm sure he enriched the way I look at things, or think about things that I look at.

Q: How did he serve as a role model to conduct yourself? How to conduct your life? Or how not to conduct your life?

White: In general I'm much more reserved and traditional. I think part of the attraction of him for me was his fearless behavior about confronting anything, and the fact that if he didn't know about something, all the more reason to leap in and find out about it. It's just a nice thing to keep in mind when one is feeling very reserved.

Q: Are you really reserved? You haven't really held back today. You're not a diffident gentleman, you're a— But has he made you feel like it's okay to be bold every now and then?

White: Oh, by all means. He never spoke in any kind of small talk. Even if he was talking about a drip of water off a glass, it seemed to be profound, and fascinating, and interesting, and he was utterly engaged. Nothing was ever [that] you said something because that was the proper thing to say.

Q: Not a superficial character.

White: Not at all. Which is an interesting kind of person to be around, with a lot of connections. Or if you're living in a city and one has to behave in certain urban ways in order to get by with everybody else, which I am in favor of. It's a good idea to stop for a red light, and that kind of stuff.

Q: Sharing the space with a lot of people, one has to both be bold and careful.

Thank you, thank you. There's a possibility that we might want to reconvene and do a video interview, if that would be agreeable with you.

White: They mentioned early on that was a possibility, so it's fine. I'm here.

Q: Thank you again. It's been really a pleasure.

White: It's been a treat to speak with you as well.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: 3PM

Session #4

Interviewee: David White

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: James McElhinney

Date: August 14, 2013

Q: This is James McElhinney speaking with David White at the Rauschenberg Foundation in New York City. Exciting things are going on here. The building's under construction, undergoing renovations. We're delighted to be here speaking with you today. Could you perhaps tell us a little bit about the history of the building?

White: This was formally an orphanage called St. Joseph's Union. And when Bob Rauschenberg was looking for a building in the late 1960s, this is one of the places he saw. It was vacant. The orphanage had already moved to Staten Island. And we are sitting in the former chapel of—it was a Catholic orphanage, and he bought the building.

Q: It was empty at the time?

White: It was empty. The orphanage had moved. This was the chapel, so the altar still existed on the wall that I'm facing. So, Bob had it officially deconsecrated, and then the construction team removed the altar and had it taken apart, and the pieces were given to Marisol [born Maria Sol Escobar] for possible use in some of her sculpture.

Q: Are you aware if they were [used]?

White: I am not aware. I've never seen a sculpture and thought, "Oh there, I recognize the altar."

Q: It's a good story. You studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, interior architecture.

White: Right.

Q: You must have known about Bob Rauschenberg as an art student. What was your image of him? How did you imagine him to be prior to meeting him?

White: While I was a student I had come to New York one weekend and seen an exhibition of his *illustrations for Dante's Inferno* at Castelli Gallery [1960–61], and I was completely overwhelmed by these extraordinarily, fantastically, beautiful and wonderful works. I thought anyone that could make those must be a terrific person. So I had a completely enthusiastic thought about him before I met him.

Q: You went to work at Castelli Gallery. Is that where you and he first met personally?

White: In 1965, after I left school and moved to New York, I got a job at Castelli Gallery, and he was one of Castelli's artists. And so, in the course of working there—I can't remember the actual first day that we laid eyes on one another, but he, like all the artists, came into the gallery often. Then in 1967 he had an exhibition there that I was involved with the installation of.

Q: Can you characterize your first impression? What was he wearing? What was his mood?

White: I would imagine it was dungarees and a plaid shirt. He was interested in clothes and liked what I would call somewhat eccentric clothes and colorful clothes, and often had a colorful handkerchief sticking out of a pocket. So, I'm going to imagine that that's how he was dressed.

Q: How did you interact with him? How were you introduced to him?

White: I had gotten the job through a classmate from Rhode Island School of Design, David Whitney. And he had met Rauschenberg first, so I'm sure David said, "David, meet Bob." Bob is very gregarious and open and friendly towards, seemingly just about everybody. So, of course, it was very comfortable meeting him.

Q: How would you characterize him? What was your impression of him at that time?

White: Just a very outgoing, friendly, open person. Sometimes in interviews I've heard him say that he was shy and he used his camera as a way of connecting. But I would not have thought of him as shy from seeing him. He loved to tell stories, to be involved with people. Outgoing, for sure.

Q: Can you share a story that might have been told by Bob Rauschenberg, a memorable story?

White: There's one that I didn't hear first-hand, but I heard through a colleague, Thomas Buehler, who had been in Captiva staying at Rauschenberg's. Rauschenberg had been away

traveling for an exhibition. Someone else that worked there thought it was a good moment to check the refrigerator, which always piled up with lots of a-little-bit-of-this and a-dab-of-that from various meals. They got rid of all these odds and ends and gave the refrigerator a good scrubbing. When Bob got back, he looked in the refrigerator and was quite alarmed, and he turned to Thomas and said, “Let’s go shopping and buy some leftovers.”

[Laughter]

White: Which was very much his way of thinking about things. You used every scrap of— whether it was an article of clothing or food or anything to do with art-making.

Q: Do you think that his fondness for leftovers in the refrigerator was in some way reflective of the fondness he had for the detritus of the urban environment that he would find on his prowls around the block and incorporate into his work?

White: Bob, having been born in 1925 and grown up in the Depression, was very conscious of what was available and what was not available, and the worth of things, and not wasting things. I think there’s a big connection between what was in the refrigerator and could turn into another meal or a bubbling soup on the back of the stove that always could have another ingredient added to it, and his thinking about making, particularly the Combines.

Q: Did he ever speak about his childhood in Port Arthur, Texas?

White: Bob talked about his childhood and the austerity of the upbringing. The fact that he said he had no introduction to art or awareness of art other than pictures on a calendar that might be on the wall in the kitchen or images on playing cards. I think that was the first kind of thing where he might have seen a reproduction of an actual artwork. But there was no going to museums or art literature around the house, or any discussion of it with his family or his parents.

Q: In hearing about Bob Rauschenberg's childhood, there are accounts of his clothing being made by his mom. The legend is that she used every scrap of cloth. What did he say about that?

White: Bob was very proud of his mother's ability with a piece of cloth and could get more sleeves and fronts and backs of a shirt out of it than just about anybody, he felt. Part of her upbringing, with not having a lot of stuff, there was no sense of you wasting anything. I would imagine they made rag rugs from the very final leftovers. But Bob was very proud of that. He, at one point, thought to study fashion design at Kansas City Art Institute. Clothing was something that interested him particularly, in designing costumes, and something he kept with him all his life.

Q: So the influence of his mom as a sartorial wizard was an inspiration for him to go to art school, one might infer.

White: Possibly, yes.

Q: You met her. How would you characterize her? How did you find her?

White: She was just this wonderfully typical older mom with white hair, but very spunky, if you can use that term for her. But she drove her car up until she was quite old, and she would drive from Lafayette, Louisiana down to visit Bob in Captiva, and then she would come to New York. She never stopped calling him Milton, which was his christened name. She certainly was proud of his achievements. I don't know how much she understood about the arts, specifically when Bob used a dirty piece of cloth in an artwork. She'd say, "Oh, what are the neighbors going to say?" That kind of remark.

I think when he was a young artist, an art student, he had painted some nude figures. And she took a brush and painted bathing suits on the figures.

[Laughter]

White: Then they were stored in the garage someplace. When there was a hurricane coming and they needed the things to cover the windows for protection, she made sure they were facing in rather than out, so the neighbors wouldn't see them. She was a very religious, church-going, upright mom.

Q: And always that way.

White: Yes.

Q: When she came to Captiva, where would she attend church?

White: That, I don't know. There was a local church or two on the island, and I would imagine she went to one of those.

Q: But you never knew Bob's dad.

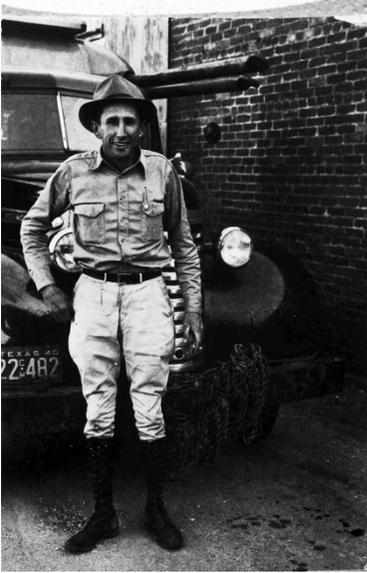
White: He had died before I met Bob. He died at a fairly young age. I think he had a heart attack.

Q: How did Bob speak of his father?

White: Bob had a tricky relationship with his father, because his father was an avid hunter. It was one of his main loves. Bob had a horror of killing animals. He had enrolled in school, and when he was told he had to dissect a frog, he decided that school was not for him. So it was something he really didn't want to take part of. So I'm sure Bob could have been a disappointment to his father in a way that he didn't want to join him on hunting trips.

Q: Did he have any other stories about his dad, the work that he did?

White: Bob didn't really talk about that very much. His father was a telephone lineman, I believe. I think he was a good father in that he provided for the family as best he could in a Depression time. I think there was food on the table and they all had clothes.



Rauschenberg's father, Ernest Rauschenberg, ca. 1940. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: And artwork to cover the windows.

White: Yes. [Laughs]

Q: You spoke about Bob's aversion to hunting and his reluctance to dissect a frog. He was in the Navy in World War II and he became a conscientious objector while in service?

White: Actually, I don't know if that's— Somehow he made it clear that he was not going to take a gun and go out and be involved in shooting. So he ended up being involved in working at a psychiatric hospital, caring for other veterans or people in the war that were injured or mentally overwhelmed by what happened to them.

Q: How did that affect him?

White: He spoke of inventing games to get everybody to sleep at the same time, and I guess it could have been a complicated, raucous situation. As with everything, he saw what the situation was and figured out how to deal with this and make it fun in a way. He didn't speak of it as an onerous time in his life at all.

Q: Can you recall a particular story he told about his wartime experiences?

White: I really can't think of a specific story.

Q: About the games he had the patients play or the inmates play.

White: I recall us talking about trying to get the first guy to stay in bed, [laugh] while he got the last guy settled down, [laugh] and then the first guy's jumping up and running around.

Q: So a comedy routine.

White: It sounded a bit like it.

Q: When you were working at Castelli Gallery, you must have been in contact with Bob a lot.

How did your friendship with him develop?

White: He was very gregarious and outgoing and had a lot of parties. It was a place that people knew they could ring the doorbell and, on the spur of the moment, be welcomed with open arms,

“And here’s a beer and here’s some food.” It was just very easy and friendly, along with lots of other people. It was an entourage of regulars that were around Bob most of the time, and then there were always other people coming in and out of the picture.

Q: Who were the core members of his entourage?

White: He had been involved, prior to my first knowing him, with the Judson dance people. He was very involved with performance and performative activities. That group of people was Trisha Brown and Alex Hay, and Alex’s wife Debbie, [Robert] Bob Morris. This whole group of people. Steve Paxton. They were very much regulars.

Then other people that were not necessarily connected with Judson, like Elaine Sturtevant, was around a lot. David [R.] Prentice, David Bradshaw. The list could go on and on.



Rehearsal for Rauschenberg’s *Spring Training* (1965) in his Broadway studio, New York, 1965. Pictured: Alex Hay, Rauschenberg, Steve Paxton, and Trisha Brown. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved

Q: John Cage.

White: He had been very involved with Cage and Cunningham when he was artistic director for the Merce Cunningham Company. And I'm not sure when that started, but he traveled with them and designed sets and costume. And then the Cunningham Company had a world tour that went on for—I don't know if it went on as long as two years. It was a very long time, over a year anyway. That was the time when Bob won the [grand prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964](#). Then there was some tension where an awful lot of focus turned from the Cunningham Company onto Bob specifically. Right around that time, Bob left working for the Company and then there was a break in their friendship.

When I first worked for Bob, he was not seeing Merce and John in any kind of regular way. It wasn't until, into the 1970s, when he was asked to design sets and costumes for another Cunningham piece called *Travelogue*. He then reunited with them up until the time of their deaths. They were great friends throughout their lives, with a bit of a pause at one point.

Q: How did Bob Rauschenberg invite you to come to work for him? You had left Castelli and you were working with David Whitney. You were working with him on exhibitions that he was curating independently.

White: Right, which was a part-time job for me. When there was not an exhibition going on, it was only a couple days a week. So I did have some free time. I happened to have gone to Captiva in the wintertime to get a little shot of sunshine and visit with Bob. At that point, he was being advised that the records that were being kept here, with handwritten records on paper and in ring

binders, should be put on the computer. He said, “I’ll have to find somebody to help organize these works to get it on the computer.” I was very happy to hear of some extra work. Bob knew me from working at Castelli, so he said, “Are you available?” It seemed like a good fit for both of us. It was supposed to be a specific length of time, and that started in 1980, and here I am still.

Q: How many days a week was that?

White: It started at three days a week, and then I increased it to four days a week. I was always happy to try to limit it to no more than that, just to have time for other things. Bob’s work is so consuming and he embraced his work from the moment he woke up until the moment he went to sleep. It always involved lots of other people around him, so he would be very happy if all his colleagues and workers were available twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week. One had to really make a point of holding one’s private life a bit. Which Bob then respected. When I finally said, “It can’t be more than four days a week,” he would sometimes start to say, “Oh, tomorrow I want this to happen.” And then he’d say, “Oh, well you won’t be here. Now I remember that.” It worked very, very comfortably. It was terrific.

Q: You spoke of him being an assiduous hoarder of press clippings and exhibition announcements. How involved was he in your work? How often did you meet to review updates to files?

White: Oh, pretty much not at all. He trusted what I was doing. When I say he hoarded those things, he just thought it was a good idea to keep them, which it was for sure. But it wasn’t

something that he really focused on. He didn't care about organizing a terrific system or keeping track of them. It was just kept and it could be put in a box, as far as he was concerned.

Q: As another possibly point of character, could that activity that he did, seemingly the way you describe it, almost on autopilot—he would just collect the things, stick it in a file—could be evidence of that childhood experience and hardship in South Texas?

White: Yes, I think Bob's being deprived of things or knowing the value of getting things, influenced his thinking about everything. He just held on to things for future use. He was conscious of a sense of a career, although the first focus was in the art-making. He probably never thought, "Oh, is this going to be a good career move or a bad career move." Because lots of things that he did were seemingly bad career moves at the time.

An artist who is much more regular in the type of work they produce, or there's an easy train of thought makes it easier for collectors, where Bob's work is so tremendously varied. When he had been very involved in an all-inclusive kind of work, then there might be almost a pendulum swing in thinking about, well let's see how minimal or how much I can leave out and still make good art. So it makes it trickier for a collector to think, "Well, what does a Rauschenberg look like," because it looks like all kinds of things.

Q: Especially today in the age of the brand, everybody is supposed to find their style, their look, and just work it and market it. But that was not his approach at all.

White: No. Bob didn't think that way. Yet it finally became the Rauschenberg way to always be breaking the boundaries and thinking of another way to do something or approach something.

Q: Well, consistency is at odds with personal growth, don't you think?

White: Indeed, yes.

Q: How did he speak about his artistic practice?

White: Bob would say he liked to surprise himself when he headed into the studio. He liked to go to the studio every day, but he felt like he didn't want to know what was going to be the result of his day in the studio. He said when he would work on a series, toward the end he felt he was either starting to repeat himself or felt he'd investigated all the variations and possibilities, then that was time to think of another thing to do.

Q: When he came to the end of a cycle working on a body of work or train of thought, and determined or elected to step away from that, leave it, how long did it take for him to germinate into a new direction?

White: He could well have been thinking about things even while he was working on one thing, thinking about the next thing. There were never long fallow periods where he was not going to the studio making things. Although he tended to work in series, there were always odd pieces

that were prompted by a visit of somebody and he wanted to make a gift for that person, so it could be very much outside of the type of work he was doing at that moment.

Q: You said he would make holiday cards and birthday cards for his friends.

White: On his own birthday he would make a series of small works and say, “For David on my birthday,” and “For Bradley on my birthday,” or whomever.

Q: On his birthday.

White: On his birthday, yes.

[Laughter]

White: We would all be delightfully surprised with these little artworks to celebrate his birthday.

Q: When we were talking about his collecting autobiographical ephemera, reviews and clippings, and catalogues, I’m just curious if he ever cannibalized any of them into his own artwork?

White: There are Rauschenbergs that include Rauschenbergs in them, yes. An example that comes to mind right away is a *Time* magazine cover, which came out at the time of the retrospective at the National Gallery. It’s the first time a living artist had been on the cover of

Time magazine. Some of the imagery and the collage that he made are fragments of his own artwork that would be recognizable to people.

Q: This would come from a sense of play that he had.

White: Very much so. It was work and play all combined.

Q: So how did he speak about the role of play in his work? The role of just trying?

White: He spoke in the most enthusiastic way about his art-making, and that he loved to do it. He wanted to share his enthusiasm with other people. It was not a case of going off to the studio on his own, locking the door and saying, “I’ll be back at dinnertime.” It was “Come on over, bring the dogs, and bring your friends, and bring some food.” And the television was constantly on. That’s just another form of activity in things that were going on. So the studio was a very lively place.

Q: What kind of TV shows was he inclined to watch?

White: The TV went on the first thing in the morning. He was not an early riser. But if it was a weekend it was cartoons and kiddie shows and soap operas and game shows. Then in the evenings there tend to be more stories. But it was not the case of solely focused on just the TV. That would be just one of many things going on. There’s whatever is cooking on the stove, and—

I remember an incident here in the house. Seemingly he was engrossed in this soap opera with some other people in the kitchen table. I was further down in the next room saying something, and then he said, “David, that’s not true.” So, he was obviously listening to what I was saying as well. He had lots of antennae out for lots of things.

Q: So he could work with people around him. He could be in the studio—

White: In fact, Sundays were the days when there were the least people around, and he made what he called his Sunday drawings, which were intimate works that he could work on by himself. But I think given the choice of doing those or having half a dozen people around and doing something bigger, he would have certainly preferred the bigger activity.

Q: And these would not be assistants. These would be friends or people visiting?

White: The assistants were friends and the friends were assistants. If you were around—the *Early Egyptian* works [1973–74] are cardboard boxes that are glued together, and very often the surface is covered with glue and then sand. They were taken out to the beach and if you happened to be there that day, “Come along and help put sand on the surfaces.” You were then an artist assistant at that moment.



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

Q: So his entourage, the milieu in which he lived socially, was also brought into his work as collaborators.

White: Very much so, yes.

Q: What was the most surprising moment of that kind that you can recall?

White: Well, maybe not of that kind. I recall, the TV was always on with what I felt were often not very interesting programs of game shows and stuff that I certainly wouldn't have turned on myself. I had been out going to the store with a colleague, and we came back and thought wouldn't it be nice just to walk in the door and all of a sudden there was some classical music on. And we walked in the door and there was some classical music on. It just happened that it came on, and Bob certainly didn't turn it off. He welcomed whatever was coming over the airwaves. That surprised me a lot, that moment.

He even spoke then, when he was at Black Mountain, when I remarked on it to him. He said, “Oh, I sang part of the *Mass in B Minor* [1749, by Johann Sebastian Bach].” Just stuff that hadn’t occurred to me that he had ever even focused on, let alone participated in.

Q: Was he ever in a church choir as a kid?

White: He may have been, but I’m sure that, as a kid, he would have been asked to go to Sunday school, and then I imagine, church.

Q: Did he speak much about his experiences at Black Mountain?

White: He did, although as the years went on, and people realized the importance of Black Mountain, more and more he was asked to speak about it. And finally he’d say, “I’ve said the last word I have to say about Black Mountain. That’s it. Don’t ask me anymore.” He felt he had spoken very much about it in his relationship with [Josef] Albers, who was, he felt, his most influential teacher. It was a troublesome time for Bob with Albers’s strictness. And I think Bob was always rebelling against it. At the same time, he felt he learned a great deal from him, and certainly respected what Albers taught him.

Q: Did he ever speak of his experiences at the Art Students League of New York?

White: Actually, he spoke about Art Students League not as much. So I don’t know if that was a time that he was there less, or it was with people that he didn’t connect with so much. There’s a

wonderful story about—everyone was supposed to be doing a life drawing, and Bob put a piece of blank paper down at the door, so everyone’s footprints were recorded on this piece of paper. Which in one sense is a life drawing. [Laughs] What could be more to the point than the comings and goings of the student in and out of the room? He always had an inventive way about, “Here’s the task, how can I make it one step further and that much more interesting.”

Q: Where is that drawing today?

White: I don’t know if it lasted past that day.

Q: Part of your responsibilities, after joining the Rauschenberg enterprise, not merely a member of the entourage, an occasional guest, friend, but actually working with Bob, you became involved with the ROCI exhibitions. Can you tell us a few stories related to the ROCI exhibitions?

White: ROCI was this very grand scheme of traveling around the world to challenged countries—I think the term was, or—it wasn’t third-world countries. But it was—

Q: Developing?

White: Developing countries, thank you. The way it worked, Bob would go to the country and more often than not, or every time, took photographs, and gathered examples of works by the

local artists or craftsman. He then came back and made the work at the studio in Captiva, and then there was an exhibition in the country.

The first country was Mexico, and Bob made maybe a dozen *ROCI MEXICO* paintings. In the initial venues of the exhibition, there was also work that Bob had made prior to the ROCI tour, just to round out the exhibition. But as it went on and more and more ROCI works were made, more and more of the original earlier works were dropped out. So by the time the concluding venue—the National Gallery, in Washington—it was only works that had been made for the ROCI countries.

It was a very lively, complex situation. Bob loved the travel and the exoticism of the peoples, of the languages, of the costumes, of the food. It was something that he was tremendously involved with for about five or six years.

Q: You didn't accompany the exhibition to every one of the venues. Which of the venues were you actually involved in directly?

White: I went to the ROCI Mexico venue, which was the first one. I was not so involved in the installation. I got there just prior to the opening. Then went to ROCI Cuba, ROCI USSR, which was in Moscow, and Kuala Lumpur.

Q: Can you tell us a little about Bob's working style as an artist mid-installation? How did he interact with the people from the venue, the curators from the venue, the local community? How did he conduct himself? Are there any stories you can share about that?

White: Bob enjoyed installing his art, as much as making his art. He had very specific feelings about it. I always felt he was somewhat like a mother hen. Every chick was his favorite and wanted it to be included. Often I felt the installations were practically clotted with work just to get them all in. But it's kind of— The nature of Rauschenberg's work was reflected in the nature of his installations. That's not always the case. They were certainly handsome shows. And in every case, there was a curator, a local curator, at the venue. They would have to work together. But Bob had very specific ideas, and curators, in general, when there's an artist present, they very often defer to the artist's ideas about his own work. It makes sense.

Q: He liked the lighting to be as intense as possible, I read somewhere.

White: There was an exhibition of his early silkscreen paintings that he painted between 1962 and '64. There was a beautifully curated exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Roni Feinstein was the curator and it was all installed, and so Bob was asked to come up not long before it was to be opened. At that point, it was already on the walls. And Bob looked around and said, "Gorgeous. Double the light." Which is not necessarily how conservators feel. They're always talking about lux and candle power and light levels. But Bob thought if brighter light made it easier to see and look better, it should be that way. And if it was going to fade away faster, that was not his concern.

Q: Do you think he looked at installations as being the same, essentially, as the works in the exhibition, that the exhibition was a work in itself?

White: Yes. I would think Bob really embraced installing an exhibition the way he went about making a painting.

Q: Or performance or anything.

White: Yes. Or cooking a meal.

Q: There was a story about a conservator posing a question about Scotch tape in a piece. You want to tell that story?

White: Sure. Bob was here in New York one time, and somebody arrived with a collage that had been done years previously, and the older Scotch tape, over the years, would turn yellow, and practically orange. So this person was hoping to get the artwork restored, and said to Bob, “Well, surely you’ll agree that we can remove this tape and put newer tape, which would have more the look of the way the piece did the day it left your studio.” And Bob said, “Not at all. That’s the nature of the artwork, and the artwork has a life as well. It should not be touched.”

Another case of that sort, when there was a sculpture, like a cube with screening on the side, and the object within the cube had somehow, in shifting, got tipped on its side. Bob was comfortable

leaving it in that new position, rather than trying to restore it to a former way—even though Bob had chosen the former way as the way he wanted it to be seen.

Q: But he could accept changes to the object over time.

White: There was a *Hoarfrost* piece, which are these unstretched fabric pieces which are just pinned to the wall, and often they have layers of fabrics [*Hoarfrost series*, 1974–76]. One of these pieces had a small kind of handkerchief-sized piece of fabric that was sewn just with a couple of dots of thread connecting it to the top of the larger piece, which was pinned to the wall, and it was on exhibit in the museum. When a guard wasn't looking, somebody snipped these two pieces, these two threads, and made off with this smaller handkerchief-sized piece, which was an image of a tossed salad in a bowl. You could declare it a total loss and collect insurance. But Bob, who still owned the piece, decided to replace it with another piece of fabric of the same size, so compositionally it was the same, but it was completely other imagery. It was a piece of statuary at this point. But he changed the title from whatever it had been to *Ex-Salad* [*(Hoarfrost)*, 1975; note: formerly *Bulb*]. He loved wordplay in titles and in speech and everything.



Robert Rauschenberg
Ex-Salad (Hoarfrost), 1975
Solvent transfer and collage on fabric
60 x 38 inches (152.4 x 96.5 cm)

Q: Was he a writer? Did he keep a journal?

White: He did not keep a journal. He was dyslexic, so reading did not come easily to him, even though he had quite a—very lively, extensive vocabulary, which you can see from the titles of his artworks. When asked to write sometimes at the death of a colleague, write a few words about Andy Warhol, for example, and for a magazine or journal, he wrote very intriguing, interesting pieces, but it was with a lot of effort on his part.

Q: Speaking about his willingness to accept the impermanence of the materials, works of art, he was close, at one point in time, to Marcel Duchamp and Teeny, his wife.

White: Correct.

Q: And, of course, you think of the Duchamp piece in Philadelphia as being sort of the textbook example of a work of art that's falling apart day by day. Did Bob speak at all about Duchamp and his relationship to him?

White: Just that Bob had met Duchamp earlier on. I forget how that came about originally. I think Bob and Jasper Johns probably met Duchamp at the same time. He was in awe of Duchamp's mind and brilliance, as almost anyone is who becomes aware of him. So I think he saw both Marcel and Teeny whenever he had the chance.

Q: But he had no memorable stories about a game of chess or—

White: No, I don't recall. I know he took things to ask Duchamp if he would sign them. There was a Duchamp exhibition that included the *Bottle Dryer* [1914, fourth version 1960], but the original had been lost many years prior to that. And so it was agreed that there could be a newer version of it. It was in an exhibition here in New York, and Bob was able to buy the piece for next to no money at all. He took it with trepidation over to Duchamp to see if he would sign it. I think Teeny said, "Oh, he'll sign anything." [Note: The work was part of the traveling group exhibition *Art and the Found Object*, 1959–60, in which Rauschenberg also participated; the date of the work corresponds to when it was inscribed and signed by Duchamp.]

Q: [Laughs]

White: And then Duchamp wrote in French, “I forget what the original phrase I wrote was” and then he signed it.

Q: Did Bob speak about his influences—artists who were either mentors or whom he admired?

White: Bob spoke of Picasso and Matisse, because I think there were times when there were shows of both, Matisse and Picasso at the Museum of Modern Art. Bob felt that he preferred Matisse’s work of the two artists. I don’t know if that actually means he was more influenced by, but he just felt more connected with Matisse’s work.

Q: He famously erased a drawing by [Willem] Bill de Kooning, and I understand that they were friends at one point in time. Were they still in touch when you knew Bob?

White: No, I didn’t hear any kind of connection between Bob and de Kooning. I think by the time I started working, de Kooning was full-time at Springs on Long Island. Bob was either in New York or Captiva, and didn’t pursue him. He was very, very respectful of de Kooning’s work. When he went to de Kooning to ask if he could erase a work, he said he did it with a great deal of trepidation. The minute he was in the door, he was sorry that he was there, but it was too late. But de Kooning agreed with the notion, and so gave him—he said, “I’ll give you something. It’ll be quite difficult.”



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: As it was to erase the drawing. It required a lot of care, craft, to not destroy the drawing by the removal of the marks.

Let's go back to ROCI. Tell us a few stories about the exhibition in Cuba, because at that time, the relations between the United States and Cuba were less warm than they are now. It was still pretty much a hostile relationship between Cuba and the United States. How did the ROCI show in Cuba come together?

White: I think to have an exhibition or to go to Cuba at that time, which was just after the mid-eighties, you had to be invited because the U.S. Government didn't allow spending U.S. dollars in Cuba, supporting the regime with any of our money. He had been invited by an arts organization in Cuba. It's my understanding how that came about. But it was tricky to even get to Cuba, or to get the artwork into Cuba. It was arranged through the museum in Mexico, where

the initial ROCI exhibition had taken place, to fly the artwork in through Mexico, rather than just from—you couldn't fly it from the United States directly to Cuba.

We were able to fly from Miami into Cuba, but it was a strange thing where, when you looked on the board at the airport listing all the flights coming up that evening, there was no listing at all of a flight to Cuba. Then at some point, some official came and kind of said, "Psst," in your ear and said, "Gate 27 at 2 AM." You went there, and there was a flight leaving for Cuba. They made sure that nothing was stamped in our passports that showed that we had ever been to Cuba. It was quite an exciting adventure just getting there.

Q: What kind of aircraft was it? Do you remember?

White: I think it belonged to a regular American airline. I can't recall the name of it. The ROCI exhibition took place in three different buildings in Havana. One was specifically the photography, and then the other two places had divided the work. It was a very elaborate exhibition. Havana was almost like stepping into a time machine, because all the automobiles were American automobiles, from the time of [Fulgencio] Batista. There was very little to buy in the way of food or goods in the marketplaces. Very special. Bob got very involved with the show.

Q: Where did you stay?

White: We stayed in what had formerly been the Hilton hotel. I forget what the original name was. It was now the Cuba Libre or something like that. All the amenities had stopped at the time of the takeover as well. So the plumbing was iffy, and the lighting. It was all—

Q: Air conditioner.

White: —a nice adventure.

Q: The exhibition took place in three venues. What was your impression of the reaction by the local artists?

White: In every ROCI venue, local artists were incredibly excited to see contemporary work by an American artist, because all these were places where they didn't have access to seeing that kind of work, even in magazines or newspapers. There was always a lot of enthusiasm. In Russia, there were lines that snaked all around the square, waiting to get into the exhibition. It was the first time they'd seen American art in Russia in years and years.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Can you tell us how Bob felt about the audience response to the ROCI exhibitions?

White: Bob was very pleased at the incredible enthusiasm of particularly young people and young artists, which would have made Bob particularly happy. In China, they talk about before

Bob got there and after Bob got there, and how it affected the young artists' working habits.

Apparently in China, I was not on that trip, but everything was so rigid and controlled. He was told that you could only work between 9 AM and 5 PM, or whatever the hours were, and that's not at all the way Bob worked in his studio, and didn't want to work that way there either. It took a lot of persuading to convince somebody that you didn't have to turn off the lights at 5:01 and walk out, lock the door. I think they were horrified at first and then mystified, as it was. And then I'm sure they finally embraced Bob's enthusiasm.

Q: Tell us how Bob responded to the relatively lukewarm reception that ROCI inspired among American critics.

White: Bob said at one point that he thought that it took about twenty-five years for the public to catch up to what he was doing. I would imagine that it probably disappointed him that there was not a more enthusiastic response to something that he was so enthusiastic about. But I don't think it probably surprised him. It was interesting. The final venue of the ROCI show at the National Gallery coincided with an exhibition called [*Robert*] *Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*. So you had the very earliest work and the most recent work in the same city at the same time.

The early work, a lot of it was unknown to a lot of people but had been shown in the very early fifties, and not since then, and not with a lot of attention even when it was shown. So that got a lot of very enthusiastic attention. Bob, I'm sure, read the various reviews, but I don't think it stopped him from pressing on in any way.

Q: Did he ever seem influenced by what the press or what art critics had to say about him?

White: I'm not aware of his choosing to change his focus based on what somebody said.

Q: He was a friend of the late Robert Hughes.

White: Correct. I don't know if they first met at the time that Bob Hughes wrote the cover story for *Time* magazine at the time of the retrospective, or if they'd known each other beforehand. But in any case, they became very good friends, and they're both these very lively storytellers. There was one moment when Hughes had an operation on his throat or his voice box or something, where he was told by the doctors, "Now, you go and don't say anything for a month" or whatever the time was. And Hughes went to Captiva, I guess, invited by Bob, "You can be isolated, and be quiet, and heal." Then Bob Rauschenberg said that every time Bob Hughes walked in the room, he just started talking. He just couldn't resist having a conversation with Bob Rauschenberg.

Q: Were you often a fly on the wall when the two of them were together?

White: Not often. There were times. So many of these get-togethers took place in Captiva, when I was basically in New York.

Q: Did Bob Rauschenberg like to talk about art, artistic ideas, theoretically or critically?

White: Sometimes Bob would talk that way. Often, it seemed to be completely other things.

What had happened on the soap opera that day. Not that it ever seemed mundane in any way, just he would tie it in with something other.

Q: When we spoke before, we heard you tell a story about *Salvage*, a piece called *Salvage*—selvage, salvage.

White: There is a body of work called the *Salvage* series [1983–85], which came about because Bob had been invited by Trisha Brown to design the stage decor and the costumes for a piece of hers called *Set and Reset*, a choreographed piece. And for the stage decor, Bob took a lot of black and white photographs in and around Fort Myers, Florida. And these were projected on the back of the stage. There were four images, side by side, that filled the whole stage. And then every few seconds, they would all shift one spot to the right, and a new one would be introduced and one would leave. Some of the same imagery was made into silkscreens, which were screened onto very gossamer white fabric, rather like wedding veil fabric. That's what the costumes were made out of.

The fabric was screened on big lengths of this fabric, a horizontal surface. Since the fabric was so gossamer, when you lifted up the finished fabric to be used for the costumes, the residue was on the piece of fabric on the table that was there to catch the residue. Bob, not being one to waste an invitation that presents itself, saw these pictures that were in the making on their own, practically. And so, that's how he started this *Salvage* series by salvaging these works. He then collaged some of the other fabric on top of it, made it more traditionally Rauschenberg. But the

finished edge of the long roll of fabric is called the selvage, and so it was, again, a play on words of the type that Bob loved.



Set, costumes, and lighting by Rauschenberg for Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Set and Reset* (1983). Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: © Beatriz Schiller 2013

Q: So this was the silkscreen and ink pressed through the cloth—

White: Right

Q: —onto the cardboard?

White: It wasn't cardboard. It was, in fact, fabric, of which then became—that was what the surface of the painting was. It could be a piece of canvas or a piece of muslin or whatever.

Q: So the material underneath, the material being printed, would receive a ghostly kind of residual image from the silkscreen process.

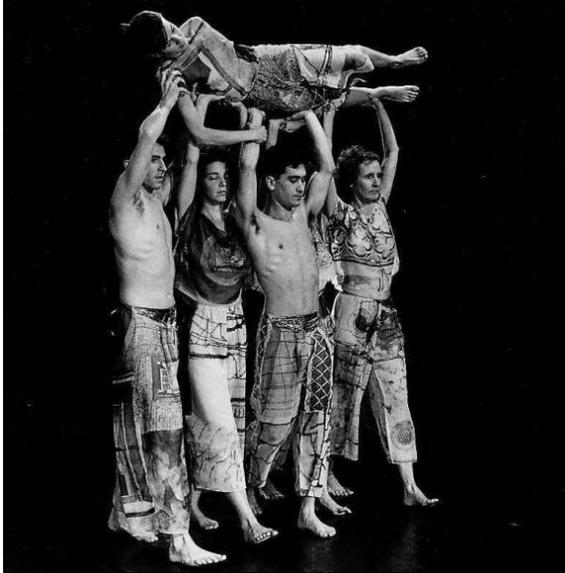
White: Right. And that piece of fabric was not changed with every screening, so it already had almost a collage-like feel to the imagery that was on this.

Q: So the first piece of cloth that would have been screened would have left the wet residue of the ink on the underlying cloth. And then the next sheet would be applied over that, and it would receive a little of that residue from underneath.

White: Well, I think they waited long enough for that to dry before the next one was screened, because the costume material was very controlled, what imagery he wanted in. I don't think that had chance imagery that came up from below.

Q: So there was not also the chance imagery from underneath, or they would change—

White: I don't believe that was the case, no. The imagery became chance imagery in a way, once the fabric was cut up into a costume. This became a sleeve, this became a leg. And then something that started out in one position on the fabric with something else next to it was not necessarily next to that same image, once it was a costume.



Set, costumes, and lighting by Rauschenberg for Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Set and Reset* (1983). Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: © Beatriz Schiller 2013

Q: Let's talk a little about Captiva. Now, he had already moved to Captiva when you started working as a part of his organization.

White: Yes, Bob moved to Captiva right around 1970 or '71. Although I knew Bob from the Castelli time, I didn't start working for him until 1980. So he was very much settled and working in Captiva the time I started working.

Q: How did he come to choose Captiva?

White: I think Bob felt he was getting a little overwhelmed by all of New York's activity. So many friends and so many lives all intersecting. He loved the water and the shore, having grown up in a similar situation in Port Arthur. He just decided he wanted to find some retreat near water, and then did circles around various airports that wouldn't be too difficult for getting back to and from New York. So one airport was Fort Myers, and then from there he ventured forth.

Q: But it's also completely unlike Port Arthur, which is a—

White: Yes, indeed.

Q: —petroleum wasteland.

White: Right. No, Captiva was this wonderful, unspoiled retreat. At the time he found the place, to get there you took a ferry from the mainland to Sanibel, which is the adjoining island. You drove across Sanibel, and then over a tiny bridge and over a little bit of a creek onto Captiva itself. And you still do that last part of the trip, but now there's a causeway from the mainland onto Sanibel.

Q: What kind of a community was there when he arrived?

White: Captiva is very small-scale, even now, year-round community. It's very much a tourist destination. In cold winter months, the population probably more than quadruples. It gets very crowded.

Q: There were other numbers of actors who had homes there. Like Raymond Burr had a home there.

White: Oh, really. I wasn't aware of that. At one point, after Bob had been there for a while, Roy Lichtenstein and his wife, Dorothy, purchased a house on Captiva, not too far down the beach. I think when Bob was there he was very much involved in his own work, and what was going on in the studio. There was always a constant influx of people asking if they could come down and visit, either to propose an activity, or an exhibition, or a book. He was not at a loss for company and people if he wanted it. I think at one point he probably had to say no to a lot of things just to have some time to work and time.

Q: He was on good terms with Jim Rosenquist, too.

White: Jim and Bob were very, very close friends. Jim then got a studio, house and studio. It's north of Tampa, I believe, so it's not—

Q: Aripeka.

White: Aripeka. So it's not very close by, but Jim would come to Captiva from time to time. They would see each other in New York as well.

Q: And he kept this place. He kept an apartment here where he could stay if he came.

White: Yes. Bob's accountant was advising him to sell this white elephant of a place once he moved his setup to Captiva. But Bob loved the building. He loved New York. Although he never, then, used it as a studio anymore, he came here and stayed here, and then met with people

to do with projects, or it was a home base before he was heading off to other travels.

Interestingly enough, the whole neighborhood just changed dramatically over the years. It's quite a sought-after place at this point.

Q: Maybe we could speak a little about his domestic life. He was an enthusiastic cook. Fond, you told me, of making sort of hot, seafood-based, spicy Gulf [Coast] fare.

White: Oh, Bob loved spicy food, always in search of the hottest peppers he could find. The same way he would make these small drawings to celebrate his birthday he would give to friends, one year, he made a big batch of extremely hot, hot sauce, and put it into little jars and sent them to everyone as gifts. Apparently, Elizabeth Taylor responded, "Are you trying to kill me?"

[Laughter]

White: It was hotter than—

Q: He knew canning. I guess that was another thing he must have learned from his mother.

White: Maybe it was so hot, it didn't need to have any kind of—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Did he put you to work in the kitchen?

White: I think he'd probably put anybody around to work, if there was something to be chopped. I mean he was a terrific host, but as with everything, they were group efforts or community efforts, as opposed to his being locked away in the kitchen by himself and saying voila as he walked through the door.

Q: If you don't work you don't eat. You had to pitch in.

White: He would even say, "Taste this and tell me if you think it needs something." Although he knew how he wanted it to taste.

Q: You told me also that here, in New York, he had an assistant who was a studio assistant, and sort of the majordomo of the building, named Sachika Takahashi, who was also a tremendous cook, and there's a great stove upstairs. Was there ever any tension between the two?

White: Sachika is this wonderful cook and he was used to living here after Bob moved to Captiva. Sachika stayed on as the caretaker of this place. He was on his own more often than not. So when Bob would come up, it was then Sachika feeling slightly displaced from his own kitchen. So there was tension where Bob never hesitated to stick a spoon in the pot and give it a taste, and suggest whether it needed this or that.

Q: He loved pets. Can you share some stories about Bob's pets?

White: I think there's some pictures of Bob from his childhood where there seemed to be animals in the picture. He may well have had some pet dog even then. I'm more aware of later on when he moved up here. He had a kinkajou, which was before I knew him. But he had this pet and then, when I first knew Bob, there was his beloved dog, Laika, which was named after the dog that was on the spaceship that went—

Q: Cosmonaut dog.

White: Exactly.

Q: First canine in outer space.

White: Right. Laika. She had a litter of twelve pups or something like that. So all of a sudden there were lots of dogs around. And he had a lot of cats. And he was involved with these performance pieces—they were not called Happenings, but performances he did at one point. One was called *Spring Training* [1965], and the random lighting for this event— He went to the Trefflich's Pet Shop on Chambers Street and rented a bunch of turtles. Then he taped flashlights to their backs. And so, it was random lighting—where the turtles went the light went.

It was interesting to then find out afterwards, there is a Japanese tradition of enormous sea turtles where they put big candles on their backs for some sort of ceremony. Then they go in the water

and the candles extinguish. I'm not sure if Bob was aware of this or not. But it was interesting, this parallel situation.

After the *Spring Training* performances, the turtles were returned to the pet shop where they'd just been rented, except for one, named Rocky, which he kept as a pet. Rocky turned out to be a female, which was to everyone's surprise after she laid an egg.



Left: Rauschenberg with his dog, Red, in Port Arthur, Texas, 1935. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Right: Rauschenberg's pet turtle, Rocky, Lafayette Street studio, New York. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Rochelle must have been the proper name.

[Laughter]

White: And he claimed that she was in New York, and then he claimed that he took her to Captiva, but she missed Gotham and wanted to come back. So then she was here and Bob always seemed to be very delighted to see her. She was on the third floor where the stove, and the

kitchen, and artwork was installed, and she would clomp over and twist her head and seemingly be looking at a painting. Why, that just completely delighted Bob. Then when she was hungry she would clomp over and stare at the refrigerator. But Bob loved animals.

Q: There were a number of collectors who were his good friends, among them the late Henry P. McIlhenny, and you were going to tell a story about a party after an opening at ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] in Philadelphia.

White: Yes, I don't know if Bob would be too delighted in my telling the story. There was this very festive party at this very grand house on Rittenhouse Square. My recollection is the walls were covered with a fabric or wallpaper that looked like it had flocking. And then there were curtains of the same fabric. So there was a double-doorway opening covered with the same material.

So Bob, who's always an enthusiastic drinker, was having a wonderful time and was telling some story, put his elbow out to lean against the wall and just, whoosh, over. Because he was leaning against the curtain, just disappeared into the next room. But then he always took those things in stride, and got up and I'm sure made a funny remark and carried on.

Q: And it became a story.

White: Yes.

Q: Were there any other stories you might want to share about collectors? I recall we were speaking about the perception, widely held, about the encounter between Bob Rauschenberg and Bob Scull at an auction house over—

White: Oh, there was a—

Q: —over the sale of—yes.

White: There was a famous Scull auction, which was kind of the first big sale of contemporary art that had taken place and what at the time, seemed like astoundingly high prices for these works that Scull had bought not that many years before, mainly from Castelli Gallery. There is this story that there was this big confrontation with Bob Rauschenberg approaching Bob Scull and practically getting into a fistfight. Which I, not so long ago, saw a video of, or a film, of this encounter, and it's not nearly the tense, acrimonious thing that I had understood it to be. Not that Bob didn't give him a very resounding slap on the back, and said, "I worked my ass off for you to make this money." Bob was making the point, but it was not an entirely negative encounter.

Q: So he wanted to see artists getting royalties from sales?

White: Bob then became involved with an organization called Artists Rights Today, and he went down to Washington, at one point, and spoke before some committee or hearing where that was being discussed, very passionately about the artists should be—

Q: He also established a philanthropic organization called Change.

White: Change, Inc. still exists as a philanthropic— It's emergency funding for artists who have come across a bad moment in their lives. It has nothing to do with funding an art project or art-making in any way. But it has to do with Con Edison is threatening to turn off your gas or your electricity, or the landlord said, "I'm throwing you out if you don't come up with your rent money." So it is a small amount of money quickly, to get you over a hump. Bob had a real struggle financially when he was first in New York, and he often felt that a little bit of money would have helped enormously.

Q: Like the way that Pollock-Krasner [Foundation] helped artists post-9/11 [September 11, 2001] and post-[Hurricane] Sandy [2012].

White: Right.

Q: Sort of emergency grants. He loved pets. Was he an animal rights advocate?

White: I'm sure he was, although I don't recall.

Q: But he was not active.

White: I don't remember him being active. And he was not a vegetarian. So he didn't mind cooking meat for food. But he was not interested in shooting an animal.

Q: And you shared that he liked fishing. It's kind of a Hemingway thing, right?

White: Well, the house in Captiva is right on the shore of the Gulf. He would take his fishing rod out. And it's very benign for the most part. There's no crashing waves, so it's easy to stand up to your waist or whatever in the water. It's a very comfortable place to be and watch the sun go down and cast a line out.

Q: So he was not out in the Gulf hooking marlins or anything like that.

White: No. It was from the shore, and if you're lucky enough you brought home some dinner as well.

Q: He was also active in nature conservancy. You've spoken about how he loved exotic plants and flowers, and was active in helping the Ding Darling Refuge. And an area that he had, as part of the property, that he called the jungle [Jungle Road].

White: Right. Captiva, I think, has probably pretty lax zoning laws. So, it was being developed in an alarmingly fast rate. Bob was lucky enough to, over the years, acquire adjoining properties. He ended up with a fair number of acres. I think it's the largest parcel of undeveloped land on Captiva at the moment. It's bordered by an organization that builds condominiums and rental units. I think Bob was very, very aware of how close they were and wanting them not to come any further. He delighted in having this seemingly undisturbed property. Which got very

severely damaged in the Hurricane Charley, and he spent a lot of time and effort and money replacing these trees that had been either felled or the top snapped off. He really loved the land.

Q: How large a piece of land is represented by the jungle?

White: I think the overall property's around 20 acres, and this is—

Q: So it's—

White: —given that most of the properties on Captiva are tiny fractions of an acre, and the houses are very close together. But the foliage is so incredibly thick. If you don't hear loud noises from a neighbor, you would be unaware a neighbor's even there.

Q: So he had a garden also.

White: He's very interested in plants and gardens, and there were herbs at the bottom. The house was—I think it's the zoning in Captiva—the houses have to be one story above ground level, and so they're on pillars. But at the bottom of the stairs, up to the kitchen level, there's an herb garden, so he could go down and gather whatever was needed to add to the evening's meal.

Q: Run down to pluck a few leaves of basil or whatever.

White: But in addition, there were roses, and birds-of-paradise, and lots of exotic staghorn ferns. He was very interested in plants. Even the building here in New York, when he lived here before he went to Captiva, had across one end of the third floor he had a lot of plants. And he enclosed the area with some Plexiglas, made it almost like a little greenhouse with grow lights so he could have a lot of plants and have them do as well as possible inside, in New York.

Q: Later in his life, he had a terrible fall and hip fracture?

White: Yes. He was here in New York when he fell getting out of bed. Then he was flown back to Captiva. But that started a series of declines over the last years of his life, which he fought strenuously to ignore or overcome. He had a series of mini strokes, and one of them severely affected his right hand, which is his painting hand, and distorted it in a way that he was not able to hold the camera and use the camera as he had ordinarily done. The paintings at that time were imagery that he was gathering himself when he was out photographing. He then turned to the colleagues that he was working with in Captiva and when they were going off on a trip of any sort he said, "Take your camera along and bring me back some images." They would often try to take what they thought would be a typical Rauschenberg image and he often surprised everyone and would pick the ones that he thought were the least Rauschenbergian, as usual.

Q: Well, to maintain the element of surprise.

White: Exactly.

Q: So he continued to work to capacity, even though his health was in a state of decline.

White: Even before the ill health, the art-making, either the silkscreening or the transferring of the imagery was done on a horizontal surface, like the way I was speaking before of the *Set and Reset* costume. There have always been studio assistants that were helping position a big silkscreen or whatever. It was not that violent a change in activity. Although he was not able to lift and move things around himself. There was—

Q: He could tell people what to do.

White: Right. And the imagery from a photograph that Bob would take, it would get printed on an Iris printer or whatever it was called, in whatever scale Bob chose that he wanted the image in. And it could be multiple scales. That imagery was what then became the palette for the painting itself. He was able to position and do the composing of the work completely, just because it was the lightness of a piece of paper. Then once it was in place, then there was this squeegeeing thing of the moistened surface to transfer the ink from the Iris print onto the painting itself.

Q: So he continued to work up until his death.

White: Yes. In fact, he finally was confined to a hospital bed, but he chose to have that in his studio, as opposed to his house, just to be surrounded by the artwork and the art-making facilities.

Q: That reminds me of the image of Matisse at Vence, at the end of his life doing big drawings for the cut-outs and for the St. Paul chapel [Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence].

White: Right. It occurred to me that there was a similarity. It was always difficult to figure out what one could give Bob for a Christmas present or a birthday present since he was wealthy enough to buy anything he wanted or needed. He's such a quick thinker, it couldn't be anything everyday or ordinary in one sense. Or it could be ordinary, of course. One time I did give him the book of those photographs of Matisse. Not that I did it to inspire. I thought the correspondence of the two things was interesting.

Q: This was at the time that he was unwell.

White: Right. I knew that Matisse was a hero as well, so he seemed to like it.

Q: That's a very kind, thoughtful gift.

White: Well, he liked the book.

Q: What's the last memory you have of being with Bob Rauschenberg?

White: Wow.

Q: When's the last time you saw him?

White: I really am not sure which time. It must have been in Captiva. And, of course, one never thinks, "Oh this is the last time I'm seeing—"

Q: Of course.

White: "—somebody." Bob was always, "Get back to work and see you later." It was very that kind of upbeat, positive response on his part. So I really don't recall a final walking out the door and thinking, "Wow."

Q: I never had the pleasure to have made his acquaintance, but having spent a number of days in your company hearing these stories, I'd imagine that David White could be at work engrossed in some task, and just for a moment half expect that Bob Rauschenberg was going to walk through the door.

White: Oh, and of course, we're working with archives, so then you're putting a video on and seeing him move and hearing his voice. In one sense, he seems still very much part of this. Even just looking at the stove and thinking of all the meals that he made there.

Q: So his spirit animates this place.

White: It does, indeed. To our great delight.

Q: To speak of Bob's legacy, one must imagine that a catalogue raisonné must be in the works. Did he leave any instructions to that effect? Was he involved in the preparations at all for that?

White: Bob didn't leave any instructions about a catalogue raisonné. There were various times during his life when he would be approached by someone suggesting they would want to do a catalogue raisonné of the prints, for example. Bob would be— Often we'd have meetings around the kitchen table and discussions would take place. He was certainly aware of the notion of it and had no objection to the—I'm sure he'd probably like the idea of a catalogue raisonné. It was nothing that he necessarily pressed for. He was always more interested in what was happening in the studio that day.

Q: We spoke a lot about the transition of the archives and the filing system from folders, to ring binders, to computer files, and the taxonomy of work from paintings, to drawings, to editions and all the permutations of media, and performance, and physical objects. His work blurred a lot of the boundaries between disciplines and that seemed to have been his intention. It also presents certain challenges to a person, like yourself, who will be taking the lead in the effort to put together a catalogue raisonné.

White: There are different ways that one can organize a catalogue raisonné, either chronologically, embracing all the mediums of a certain time period, or by medium. It is a tricky thing to try to figure out what works best for Bob's work, because whenever he could, he blurred and confused the boundary between one medium and another, starting with the Combines. Is that

a painting? Is it a sculpture? He calls it a Combine. Very often, he would do print editions where each image in a print has their unique parts, as well as fixed parts. The notion of a print being everyone looks exactly the same is immediately destroyed by Bob's intention.

Q: So even in the editions, a lot of the prints were individualized in some way by modification or an addition.

White: The same is true with photographs where often there's what's called a match print and that's the standard for the contrast. Bob is quoted in some interview saying, "I have different feelings every day I go into the dark room. And so, sometimes this image I will want printed darkly, and another time much more pale." Even with something as fixed as a photograph, he didn't have a notion of fixity.

Q: It will be a daunting task. Is there a discussion about how to proceed? Is that on your plate right now?

White: There is a catalogue raisonné committee, which is meeting and trying to come up with the approach to take. We're at the very early stages. There's lots of data gathered for once it gets underway. But we still haven't figured out if it's going to be a chronological or by medium or what.

Q: In the meantime, though, your ring binders, computer files, and archives are available to scholars and researchers who want to come here.

White: There are a lot of requests to look at material from people doing their dissertations and working on exhibitions. Yes, we can try to make stuff available.

Q: May I presume that, apropos to my introductory comments that we are in the middle of a construction zone and a building that's undergoing renovation, that part of the renovations will be to provide some kind of environment where scholars could come and research?

White: The fifth floor is going to be made into a place that will be a source—archive storage in part—and where scholars can come. When Bob was alive, there were four of us working here and now there are twelve or fifteen, depending on what day it is. The renovation is in part just to make room for everybody and divide up the activities.

Q: Even though Bob's gone, it seems like his legacy is looking towards a bright future.

White: Sometimes it's astounding when you think one person heading to his easel in the morning, how much activity that generated, in addition to all the art itself, of course.

Q: Hopefully that will continue to inspire many generations of artists.

White: Bob's wish was that his Foundation exist in perpetuity, as opposed to other artist foundations, which exist until the work is dispersed or whatever. He was a very generous philanthropic person. He very much liked the notion of being able to have that continue.

Q: David White, thank you so much for sharing your memories of Bob Rauschenberg and all this wonderful information about his life and work and legacy.

White: It's been a pleasure to talk with you about Bob.

[END OF INTERVIEW]