

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Dore Ashton

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Dore Ashton conducted by Sara Sinclair on April 29, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

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

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Dore Ashton

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: April 29, 2015

Q: This is Sara Sinclair, I'm sitting with Miss Dore Ashton and today is April 29. Before we get started, jumping to Bob [Rauschenberg] and his work and your intersection with that work, I would like to start a little bit with you. So maybe you can tell me a little bit about where and when you were born and your early life.

Ashton: Okay. I was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1928. My god. [Laughs] I lived there until I was nine years old with my mother and father. My father was a pediatrician and a social activist type—very, very concerned with poor people. He set up what he called “baby keep well” stations in Newark, which even then was a very poor city. Last year somebody asked me where I had been born and grew up and he had a car and said, “Let's drive there.” I was shocked. It's totally black. You didn't see a single white face. It's amazing.

Q: It's changed a lot.

Ashton: Such immense change. We lived in definitely a middle-class neighborhood and my father ran those clinics and went to the poor neighborhoods, which in those days was very unusual. A doctor with a social conscience? You never even hear that phrase anymore.

Q: So maybe you can tell me a little bit about your studies and how you got into the art world.

Ashton: Well, when I was a little girl, before the age of twelve, I did a lot of crayon drawings and paintings, poster paints or whatever they had around or gave me. Everybody said, “Oh, how talented, how gifted.” My mother thought I would go to a high school of art and design in Newark. They thought that’s probably where I would go. But then I got siphoned off by literature. I started writing quite young, just for fun. I never thought of being a writer ever, not that I can recall.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison was known then as a, quote, progressive university, because it had had a famous man called Robert [M.] La Follette [Sr.], who was a socialist. In those days you could be a socialist, with a small “s”. I went to a working class high school and the way I got through without being killed was that I was a good athlete. I excelled in athletics. I remember very clearly that after school I wanted to go home with an apple and lie around and read [Fyodor] Dostoevsky and [Lev Nikolayevich] Tolstoy, but I had to go and practice. The team that I got on, the most boring sport in the world in my opinion, was field hockey. I was a center forward and I was really good. [Laughs] So I had to go to practice after school and on weekends they would have meets in other towns. It took all my time, I was furious.

Of course I got very good grades and I had heard about this La Follette and Wisconsin and socialism with a small “s”. I was a very assertive kiddo and I decided I would go to the University of Wisconsin because that’s where he was and it was known as a progressive university. So off I went.

I didn't have to take the freshman course. They just put me right in the sophomore literature course and the very first day there was this boy sitting next to me reading a letter and the letter, I knew right away, was written by an artist because there were artistic flourishes. I was peering over his shoulder and he looked up and said, "Here, you want to read it?" Well, this fellow is called Fred [Stephen] Licht. He actually wrote a very well-known book about Goya and lots of other books. He also wrote, but didn't publish, short stories and one novel, which I read in manuscript. I still speak to him; he called me this morning. Can you imagine a friendship that old? It's unimaginable. Unfortunately, he lives in Europe, in Monheim [Germany]. I was planning to go to see him, but I may not be able to because I've had some fainting spells and the doctor doesn't think that air travel is good for me. We'll see.

I was at loose ends when I graduated from the university. I took one semester off and came to New York and went to the New School, which was a very good thing for me at that time. An unpleasant thing happened. A voyeur pushed his way into my apartment. I found out later that's a breed. Luckily he didn't want to touch me, he just wanted to look. He wanted me to undress and he just wanted to look. He never came near touching me. In the end I touched him, I just pushed him out the door. That was my New York experience in the middle of college. I decided to go back and finish at the university in Wisconsin.

I didn't know what to do next. I didn't have any great ambition to do anything specific. I only took art history one year, my last year. I was not an art historian type. I had a professor whose name was Oskar [Frank Leonard] Hagen. He had a daughter I later became friendly with, who

became a famous actress called Uta [Thyra] Hagen. Uta and I became good friends. [Laughs] She really thought she was a great cook and she kept writing these horrible cookbooks. Every recipe had flour in it, really heavy German food. I don't think I ever made a single recipe. I have the cookbook, I still have it, but she was very proud of her cooking. [Laughs]

She did a very famous role with a very, very great actor, Paul [Leroy] Robeson. She was only I think seventeen or eighteen when she played with him and she told me what I didn't know about my own country. When they went on the road with one of the Shakespeare plays, *Othello* [1603], he could not go into the hotel in the front door, he had to go through the kitchen in the back. When she told me that, I could hardly believe it. But this country was horrible and it was very hard for Paul Robeson, as you can imagine. Yet all over the world he was regarded as a great singer and an actor. That sort of thing was an education in itself. I was lucky to get it.

Q: So maybe you can tell me about coming back to New York after school. You came back and you didn't really study art history. You took one class in your senior year. So how do you get on that path?

Ashton: Well, the professor, Oskar Hagen, he wrote this letter to Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]. The secretary of the department was so amazed that she did what was forbidden. She showed it to me. He wrote a two-page, single-spaced letter saying what a great scholar I was. I'd had one semester with him. The whole last page was about my good manners and I realized that for this European, Oskar Hagen, it must have been a big shock, the manners of those Midwestern kids, which I agree were hardly called manners at all. They were

really roughneck types and definitely not scholarly. For him it must have been an agony to wind up teaching there. He wrote this incredible letter and all of a sudden I got informed that I was given this fellowship that paid the tuition, the housing, the food, everything, a full fellowship at Harvard, which shocked me. Not having any idea what to do with myself, I went to Harvard.

In those days, interestingly, you could do a master's [degree]. The administration at Harvard regarded the master's as nothing, only to look you over to decide if they will invite you to do a PhD. Here I am, this Jewish kid, which they also didn't particularly like. They didn't know I was Jewish, but the very first day I went to class a young man came up to me and he said, "I wanted to meet you because I've never met a Jew before." I said, "How did you know I was Jewish?" I don't think he answered me. Later he turned out to be a very nice guy. His father was the president of the University of Maine and he himself became the director of the Philadelphia Museum [of Art] for a while. His name was Evan [H.] Turner. That was a long time later, but that was my first introduction.

I thought I was dressed very conservatively. I wore a suit with a skirt and Oxfords. I thought I was very *comme il faut* for Harvard. But it turned out that they could spot me in a minute. They all immediately regarded me as a bohemian and even how I was dressed didn't matter. It was just amazing.

As I told you, you could get a master's in one year then. You can't now; it's two years. Not having anything to do and not knowing what to do and getting this incredible fellowship, I did it. I spent the year there and I took about four or five different art history courses. I thought they

were quite interesting. But I also was having an affair in New York City. I discovered that the business school guys would drive down for the weekend to New York and being business school guys, they would take you in their car for about three dollars less than the train.

[Laughter]

Ashton: So I'd come into New York and I was having an affair with an older man. That's how I spent my weekends, until in the middle of the year they called me in and they literally said, "You're never in the library on the weekends." Can you imagine? [Laughs]

There was one professor, he was ancient, I thought. Who knows now, I was young enough to think anybody with white hair was ancient. He was what they called a polar bear. They went swimming under the ice in the middle of the winter. Can you imagine? He was a very stuffy, old-fashioned professor, but that was his thing. So of course I had to meet him. He wanted me to try being a polar bear, but that wasn't my thing. I'm a summer girl. I'm a swimmer.

Harvard was good exposure because really I'd only known a certain kind of people. I met different kinds of people. I didn't do that well. I got several B plusses instead of As. I told them I didn't want to get a PhD so it was no question, but I bet they wouldn't have invited me, I wasn't good enough. But I got one A+ and I was very proud of that. It was from a famous old professor called [Jakob] Rosenberg. He wrote a book on Rembrandt, a very highly regarded book. He used to do what they all should have done, being in Fogg Museum [Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts]. He would bring drawings from the Fogg collection into the

classroom and have us comment. Well all the other students had proper training and they'd talk about things like—I didn't even know what a picture plane was; I never heard the term. No art teacher I ever had said, "Oh, your picture plane is—" So he would bring in these drawings and he'd ask us to comment. I'd been in art school and I had a gift somewhat. I could draw these roses quite well, if you ask me. He liked me a lot and he was a really important man at Harvard, so he gave me an A+, which they told me was really rare. The reason was that when he brought a drawing into the classroom I'd get down from my chair and kneel down and look at it.

[Laughter]

Ashton: The others would talk about the two-dimensional picture plane and the three-dimensional and all the technical terms, which I didn't even know. But I sometimes could say, "Well, this line," et cetera. He appreciated that and I was really lucky. Years later I was in a museum in Europe and a very old gentleman came over to me and said, "Hello, Miss Ashton." It was that professor. He remembered me and he told me why: because I was the only student who got down on the floor when he brought those drawings in, to really look at a drawing. All the rest would talk in the jargon that they learned. So I was lucky.

Well, you asked me, I told you—that was my education.

When I got out, I had to have a job. I got to know an art dealer who had been very famous in Europe, name was [Israel Ben] J.B. Neumann. He ran a gallery called the New Art Circle [Gallery, New York] and he was very European. He also liked girls and apparently he thought I

was an attractive girl. The other person who got to know him was, you probably know this name, Peter Selz. Yes, Peter and I became J.B. Neumann's protégés. [Laughs] He would do things like he was on Fifty-seventh [Street] and Madison [Avenue] in that big art building and when we'd come he'd lock the door. Then he'd pull out a painting that is now in the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York], an El Greco [born Doménikos Theotokópoulos], and he'd just talk with us about it. It was amazing, that's what made me want to do this.

I was in the newspaper guild [NewsGuild of New York], which is the union, and I was a reporter. I thought that was great, I thought that's what I should do. Just report what I see. I could see very well and that's how I got launched. I got the job on the *New York Times* partly because I could write fairly well and I was interested, but also partly because I was a flirt. This old guy who was the editor at that time, Howard Devree, spotted me in the galleries. He was also reviewing and he spotted me and when the man there took a three-week leave or something, Howard Devree got in touch with me and offered me this part-time opportunity. I got on the *Times* that way.

I worked at the *Times* for five years and then I had a lot of trouble, thanks to this awful guy who happened to be the son-in-law of the president's daughter. What was his name? I forgot now. I always block his name because I hated him. I invented a form in the *Times* that was a cross between a review and an essay. I wrote a review about George Grosz, who at that time was living like an absolute bourgeois in Long Island. I went to visit him. It was amazing, amazing. I wrote a proper historic review about Grosz and a couple of the other guys in the expressionist groups in Germany, in the Weimar Republic. [Mary] Margaret Truman [Daniel]'s husband, [Harry S.]

Truman's son-in-law, he was the managing editor then at the *Times* and he was furious. He thought it was pro-Communist, I was being so nice to somebody like George Grosz, who after all had been a Communist and still admitted it.

He made it his business to find a way to get rid of me and he did. I was married. My first husband was a painter, Adja Yunkers [born Adolf Junkers]. There was a group show that I had reviewed in maybe four lines in the *New York Times* and I mentioned about twelve people in the show including my husband. I didn't say a word about him, I didn't say he was a good artist or anything. His name was just on the list. That's all that guy needed and he managed to get me fired from the *Times*. There was a lot of protest about it, artists wrote letters and they got up a petition. I encouraged them to yell for the sake of other people because I thought it was terrible that he could do a thing like that. It could happen to anybody.

The thing I do remember very well is that I was given four weeks and I made up my mind, even though it was very uncomfortable, that I was going to stay there and make them sweat for that four weeks. And I did. They would do things like—being a morning paper you never went to work at nine o'clock in the morning. I would get up and go uptown and do the galleries and then come at four o'clock in the afternoon and write up in the newsroom. So he started telephoning me at home at eight-thirty or nine o'clock and saying, "Where are you?" In other words he was going to get rid of me. I said to myself, "You're going to rid of me, but not when you want," and I stuck it out for four weeks. It was horrible, but I did it.

Then the so-called art world rallied, even people who didn't like me, and they wrote petitions and this and that. The day that I left, I walked out on Times Square and it was as though I'd never been there. I didn't give it another thought. That's when it occurred to me that I could probably make a fairly decent living if I would teach and also it would give me time to consider my own work. I inquired, probably on the telephone, and one of these schools, called the School of Visual Arts [New York], was a privately owned for-profit school. It still is. I had had this byline for five years in the *Times* and the guy there, a smart guy, he decided that my byline would be helpful to him as a businessman. He got in touch with me right away and gave me a job teaching at the School of Visual Arts. I'd never taught, of course. I didn't even know what to teach. But it turned out I was good at it and students liked me. I got two and a half days free with nothing to do, on my own, which made four days with the weekend, so I could keep writing and do my thing. That's how I became a teacher and found out I liked it; I actually enjoyed it. I always taught in places where I liked teaching, which were art and architecture schools. Then this guy at the Cooper Union [New York], also a smart guy, he heard that I was teaching at Visual Arts and he offered me twice the salary that they were paying at Visual Arts. I said, "Sure."

[Laughter]

Ashton: I stayed there. Theoretically I'm still there, but I'm in a big fight with them right now. They of course are trying to cheat me. Everything has changed and things are not as nice as they used to be. I decided to fight them for the sake of the others, not for me, because I haven't got long to go. I got in touch with the union representative last week and I told him that I want to

fight them on it. They just suddenly cut off my salary. That's horrible. They can do it to any of the others as well. There are very bad things happening I hear, not only at Cooper but also at Pratt [Institute, New York]. They're not good, it's not good news for art schools.

Q: Before we continue, I'm wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about that period of time more generally, the five years that you were at the *Times* and then the first few years that you were teaching. Whose work were you seeing in the galleries? Whose work were you writing about?

Ashton: Mainly the people that you call Abstract Expressionists. I knew them all. After all I live on Eleventh Street and Tenth Street. At least three of those guys had their studios on Tenth Street, one block away from where I lived.

Q: You lived on Tenth Street?

Ashton: Esteban Vicente [Pérez] lived on Tenth Street. Jack Tworikov then was on Tenth Street. Franz [Kline], no, Franz was on Fourteenth Street. [Willem] Bill de Kooning had a studio there. I knew all those guys in the early days. I would hang out, but I never was able to hang out like the others because I had children and I had a job. At midnight they'd just be getting drunk enough to have fun and I would have to go home and get a little sleep, anyway. But I was there at the Cedar bar. I think they now call it the Cedar Tavern, which I guess was its official name, but we always called it the Cedar bar. I knew it well and hung out there.

Sometimes people asked me, “What about the women?” I would say, “What do you mean what about the women? I wrote about every one of those women,” because they thought I was against the women and I never wrote about it and that’s not true. The ones who were any good, I wrote about, and they liked me and we were friends. At the end I wasn’t so friendly with Helen Frankenthaler. There were two others. The best one, Joan Mitchell, was a really good painter and I was friendly with her, although she moved to Paris and I didn’t see her so much at the end of her life. Who else, among the women? There were one or two others, I forget now who they were, but I knew them all and wrote about them all. Even though the press claimed I didn’t, it wasn’t true. They were just getting at me as a woman, among other things. Because my first name doesn’t really say if it’s male or female, which was, believe me, very helpful. [Laughs]

Q: I can imagine. I read a story that you told. You said that in the early fifties you observed an interaction outside a gallery on Tenth Street. You saw Willem de Kooning, Bill de Kooning, having an engaged discussion with an art historian. Do you remember this?

Ashton: Yes.

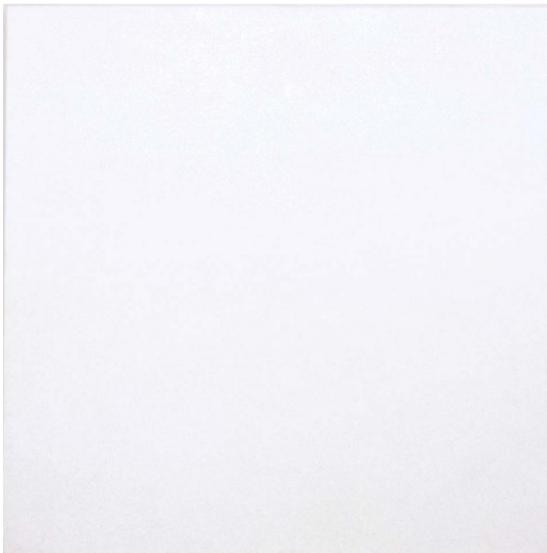
Q: Can you tell me that story? You said that afterwards you felt like you’d stumbled upon a cultural crossroad in an age where more and more artists were self-taught and were coming to reject the formal academy or coming to reject traditional academic art history. I’m wondering if you could talk about how that affected the way you approached your own work.

Ashton: Well, as I told you, I thought my job was to report. I never thought my job was to say, “This is good and that’s bad,” or “I’m against this,” never. If you looked at my work, I don’t think you’d find any attacks on artists. I didn’t bother. I just wrote about what I thought should be looked at. So if I came across Bill—well, I knew Bill quite well and Bill was a dangerous guy if he was drunk. He was violent when he was drunk. I once prevented him from dropping his own child out the window. I never talked about that, but that was some horrifying experience. He was drunk. He didn’t know what he was doing. I hoped. I was careful with Bill. But when he was in good form, Bill was a very, very cultivated man. He knew art history like nobody else and I thought he expressed himself well. I could have—and did have several times—long conversations with him about works of art that weren’t from our moment. I always thought myself very privileged to know him that way. He seemed to like me; he did seem to like me. I was alas a witness to his succumbing to what I guess was Alzheimer’s. I have a place in East Hampton, which I had in those days. In those days it was nothing like it is today—this was a little cottage about the size of this room. He moved out to East Hampton [New York] and occasionally we would meet there. He was always sober then, when we met, and it was really delightful. He rode a bicycle, he didn’t drive. We used to go to a bay beach called Louse Point. Sometimes Bill would ride up there on his bicycle and we’d stop and chat. I would say my friendship with him was very agreeable. I witnessed a couple of bad things, but he never turned—well once, I remember it so well, he never really spoke English well and he said to me, “You little American bits.”

[Laughter]

I always remembered, I'm the "little American bits" in his eyes. He suffered in America because this was no place for a guy with his civilization. The others didn't think anything particular about the fact that Bill knew his art history and he could look at a [Peter Paul] Rubens and tell you when it was painted. That didn't impress the other artists, so it was interesting. He was angry about a lot of things.

Q: You were one of six reviewers who showed up to look at Bob Rauschenberg's *White Painting* [1951] in 1953 at the Stable Gallery [New York, *Rauschenberg: Paintings and Sculpture*; Ashton, "Fifty-seventh Street: Bob Rauschenberg," *Art Digest*, 1953].



Robert Rauschenberg
White Painting, 1951
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Ashton: Oh yes, I was friendly with her, Eleanor [Ward].

Q: Do you remember anything about that show?

Ashton: Well, I think I'd been to the studio and seen them before. I used to visit Bob's studio now and then. That's how I knew about the parakeet.

Q: About the parakeet?

Ashton: Yes, he had a parakeet, at least when I knew him. What can I tell you? Then and still, once I'm interested in an artist's work I follow where they go. I follow them. I don't stand back and say, "Oh, you shouldn't go that way," never. I go where they go and try to understand why they went there and that was true with Bob too. Bob Rauschenberg and I, we got along very well, and then I got involved with him, through [Leo] Castelli, in the Dante drawings project. [Note: Having written some of the earliest considerations of the original *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* (1958–60), she was later commissioned to write the accompanying text, a canto by canto discussion, for the facsimile portfolio *Rauschenberg: XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno* (1964).] I saw a lot of Bob when we were working on that.



Robert Rauschenberg
Canto XXIII: Circle Eight, Bolgia 6, the Hypocrites, from the Series Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno, 1959-60
Solvent transfer on paper with pencil, gouache, watercolor, and wash
14 3/8 x 11 1/2 inches (36.5 x 29.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Given anonymously

Q: Yes. Before we talk about Dante, which I want to, you said you used to visit him in the studio. Do you remember when you first crossed paths with Bob? Or how or where you first met him?

Ashton: No, I don't remember, no, no, that was so long ago and I would have bumped into him here and there. By myself I always lived below Fourteenth Street and they were always, always below Fourteenth Street, so we were neighborhood bums. [Laughs] I spent time with Franz Kline because Franz was such a lot of fun and also a very bright guy and he had his tragedy in his life, but he never talked about it. But for some reason I knew about it. He must have told me. My relationship with Bob and the others was like a fellow traveler. They treated me as part of the gang, which was nice.

Q: People talk about Bob being one of the artists who was responsible for moving out of Abstract Expressionism and into something else. Is that how you saw his work? Did you think about his work in those ways?

Ashton: Well, first of all, I don't think we ever talked about something called Abstract Expressionism. I didn't certainly. No, as I say, when once I was interested in an artist, wherever he went I went. I followed Bob and we were friends I would say. For instance I can remember when, when I first introduced [Jean] Tinguely to Peter Selz and had that scandalous thing [*Homage to New York*, 1960] at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York], I brought Tinguely to Bob's studio and Bob wasn't there, but his studio was wide open and the parakeet was there and we played with the parakeet and left. It was like that. It was very different. Very

different, yes. Bob was always very nice to me, I have to say. He treated me properly and we did work together on the Dante project.

Q: Yes. How did that come about?

Ashton: I think probably Castelli, my guess was, suggested it to Bob. I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if he suggested it and Bob thought it was a good idea. Once Bob started, I remember, I did visit his studio much more when we were working on the Dante project. Then I lent my copy to a friend of mine who never returned it, who lives in Paris. [Laughs] Reymo Guinietti [phonetic]. Oh, every once in a while when he comes I remind him, but he's not about to give it back to me.

Q: Do you remember the time that you spent with Bob when you were working on the project?

Ashton: No, I don't really remember. I went to the studio quite often, I do remember that, and I got to be friendly with a parakeet.

[Laughter]

No, I don't really have a memory of it and now I don't even have the object because Mr. Guinietti relieved me of it. I remember, I did show Bob some of my accompanying text, not all, but now and then, and he always would say, "That's fine, that's fine." He was glad I was doing it and I'm really sorry that I don't have a copy. I would have liked to have had the copy.

Q: Well, I can ask at the Foundation, they probably have copies. I'll ask.

Ashton: I really shouldn't acquire anything. I'm not long for this world and sooner or later I'm going to have to decide what to do. Because this house is five stories full of stuff and some of it, I'm sure, is quite valuable. Some of it, people have forgotten. This artist, Paul Rotterdam, nobody remembers his name and yet he had a ten-year run in SoHo. Everybody knew his name, he was a famous artist, amazing. His mistake was that he left the city. He went to live in Maine, I think, or somewhere in the country.

Q: Didn't a lot of people leave the city though? I feel like a lot of people left in the sixties.

Ashton: Quite a few did, yes. Quite a few did and whenever I knew anybody with a car, I sometimes would go with them. I have a Spanish friend, a very close friend, and he knew somebody with a car and we went to see Jake Berthot and what I didn't know was Jake was already hooked on whatever it was, cocaine. So we got there and he wasn't there. A three-hour drive and then you get there and he's not there. We looked around and when they had the memorial for Jake, I thought about it but I didn't say anything. No, I just did the courteous memorial little speech. Apparently it was okay because I just got a letter from Betty Cunningham asking me if I'd do the same thing for Andrew Forge, who was a close friend of mine. I guess I will do it, but I don't know, is she doing a show? I've got the letter here, so as you see, I'm not in very good order.

Q: Why do you think artists were leaving New York in the late sixties?

Ashton: Rent. The rents were going up terribly high, that's why.

Q: Okay. They just couldn't afford to be here anymore.

Ashton: Well, I think in the case of Jake, I think Jake really did like the country. Until he fell out of a tree and broke his arm and that was the beginning of the end for him.

Q: Why do you think Bob left New York?

Ashton: Bob Rauschenberg? I think he wanted a lot of space. That was my impression. He found it where, in Florida? Yes, yes. I never went to see him in Florida, but people I knew did and said it was a fancy layout and big, yes. He kept in touch with some people I used to see. So I'd know what was going on.

Q: Did the feeling in the city change a lot in the late sixties and into the early seventies as rent was becoming more expensive and people were leaving?

Ashton: Yes, I think people were aware that the place had changed and a lot of artists had to move out because the rents were getting absolutely enormous. And that's still going on. I don't think they're doing so well because on this block there's been a "For Rent" sign out for at least a month and so that must mean they're not doing so well as they thought.

Q: How did you know [Johan Wilhelm] Billy Klüver?

Ashton: Billy hung around the kind of artists that interested me a lot and he was an absolutely charming guy, Billy was just a wonderful guy. When they did the 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering [1966], Billy came here and we talked about it and we worked together on the 9 Evenings. I was a silent partner, but I was really very much engaged with it. I was their connection with Tinguely because I'd known Tinguely in Europe, so it all worked together and Billy was just a delightful guy.

Q: What did you do for 9 Evenings? What was your role?

Ashton: I was just one of the gang. It wasn't particular. But I definitely was part of it. I was very much interested in Billy, who was a sweet man, and I'd never known an engineer before personally and so I tried to learn from him. He had a wife, Julie [Martin], and she was nice too. They had dinner here a couple of times. He was very forceful in a soft way and the artists were fond of him, they were all very fond of Billy. We all loved Billy.

Q: Yes. Did you see Rauschenberg's show? The *Open Score* [1966]? The tennis? That was part of 9 Evenings?



Mimi Kanarek and Frank Stella on the tennis court in Rauschenberg's *Open Score* (1966), 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, October 1966. Still from *9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering* (1966). 16 mm, black and white, 25 minutes. Produced by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), New York

Ashton: Oh of course, I probably saw it, yes of course, I did. The tennis, yes. I was a tennis player. That was my sport.

[Laughter]

Q: One thing that's interesting that you've said is that you felt like it was your job more to report, just to say, "Go see this, you might want to go see that," but you were not criticizing the work.

Ashton: No, I never thought I should do that.

Q: So perhaps that works very well with that period of time where the artists themselves were not that interested in explaining the work either.

Ashton: That's true. I think that's true. Yes.

Q: But has that changed?

Ashton: Well, I don't know now. I'm so old that I'm not in anymore.

Q: But even ten years after, in the seventies or eighties, I feel like it changed.

Ashton: Well, it is true, I think, that the commercial side of the art world, so to speak, grew enormously in the early seventies, probably late sixties. That did change the atmosphere and the way you got along with each other. I myself didn't follow the commercial side very closely. I don't know. I still don't know how things work economically. I wouldn't have been privy to all of the backroom deals and so on. The wonderful thing was when J.B. Neumann would lock the door and talk to me about El Greco and now when I go to the Met and see that El Greco I think, "God, that's the El Greco that he showed us." [Laughs] Those are the little adventures of the trade that were great for me—very, very right for me. I discovered that I could make a living and support my artist husband and my kids as a teacher and it turned out very well, until recently and now it's a big mess and very nasty, very nasty. I think to myself, how could they treat me like that? But they're treating me like that. So I probably am not going to do what would be the best thing, which would be to get a lawyer, but they're very expensive. I probably should, for the sake of other people, but I'm beginning to think I'm not going to bother and just say, "Oh fuck it." Let it go and let them behave badly as they are and let the others take care of themselves. Whereas I originally thought I have to fight for the others. Things have changed so much. People do the unthinkable now, art world types, things that they would never have done in my early days.

Q: Like what?

Ashton: Make deals that are dubious and connect up wealthy billionaires with whatever. The business side, which is very often monkey business. [Laughs]

Q: The artists you were friends with, did they speak to you about having an awareness that the world was changing? That it was becoming a more commercial world?

Ashton: Yes. We talked a lot about that, yes.

Q: And what did they say?

Ashton: I used to see, not the most important ones, because Bill, for instance, moved out to Long Island so I didn't see him as often as when he lived on Tenth Street. But I talked to people like Jack Tworkov, who eventually ran the Yale [University, New Haven] art department or something for a while [note: chairman of the Yale art department, 1963–69]. Or whoever I ran into in the neighborhood, I'd talk with them and keep up with what they were pissed off about, which was a lot of the commercialization. They were not for that. The interest in money was very different. They weren't so greedy in those days. Me too. I could have gotten much better jobs and the job that I did take, which was at Cooper, which theoretically I'm still employed by, paid much less than I could have got if I'd gone to Columbia [University, New York] or to NYU [New York University]. I didn't want to be a professor-professor and at Cooper they left me alone and that was good. I've had sometimes quite gifted students. Some who made it big.

Q: Were you teaching artists or people who were interested in writing about art?

Ashton: No, artists and architects at Cooper. The architects didn't have to have a course like mine at all, so if they did take it they usually were interested in painting, too. I had a few very, very talented architects. They were my kind of people, art students. I wouldn't have been as happy if I had taken jobs I was offered at the big universities. I didn't want them. Except I did teach at Yale for twelve years, because a student of mine became the head of the division. But he didn't behave well, either. They just didn't reappoint me. They didn't send me a letter saying we are terminating you—nothing. I just never was reappointed. I thought that was very bad manners on his part. He was my student. His daughter was my student years later, but that's how they do things now, apparently. When I mentioned it to a Yale who came to visit me, he said, "Oh, that's not so unusual." So that's OK with them.

Q: So times have changed. Do you think also that the arts, the education itself has changed? Has curriculum changed?

Ashton: Well, I don't know because I'm not an educator type. I do get that magazine, *NEA* [*National Education Association*] it's called, a magazine for teachers by the teachers' union and I usually say to myself, "You should look at this," and it hangs around here and then I throw it out.

[Laughter]

But there's no question that it's not in good shape. The attitude toward art education and architecture is not in good shape. It's regarded as a commodity, something that you make money from. That's not good.

Q: When do you think that changed? When did that happen?

Ashton: In the seventies. I think. I don't know. I'm not that attuned to that kind of news and I never paid any attention to it. When the issue of the tuition at Cooper, which is boiling right now, came up, somebody called me about that. I'm still regarded as faculty, I think, at Cooper although they're trying every which way to get me off and also they're not paying me. If I want to get what I'm entitled to, I'm going to have to get a lawyer. So the lawyer will eat everything that I'm entitled to. To me it's a very unappealing moment it seems. People like me, it doesn't mean a thing. I said to one of them, "How many people on your faculty published at least twenty-five hard cover books?" Only me. But that doesn't matter at all anymore. They don't regard that as anything special. I myself am so stupid. I didn't realize that they didn't think that was important. For years. [Laughs] I would have thought that would be important. No, it's not. As I now see.

Q: You've spoken a little bit about the art itself becoming a commodity. Another thing that's been interesting for me is hearing about how the interest also expands to the rest of the world. So there's suddenly not only a market, but an international market. Is that something that you observed at all?

Ashton: No. As I told you, the business side was never my forte. I never understood how it worked. I was not friendly with the art dealers because they were businessmen or women. One or two I became friendly with. I was very friendly with Eleanor Ward, but after all she was an aristocrat and she was above the battle in every way and probably a very, very rich lady. I helped her when she did that important show she did, I forget what it was called. At the Stable Gallery. The Stable Annual was it? I helped whenever I could. Everybody I knew thought highly of her because she didn't have to do that. She was a very wealthy lady apparently.

I have a cottage in East Hampton. When I got it, it cost \$25,000, which even then was an amazing thing in East Hampton of all places. East Hampton was pleasant in those days. Bill had just built his studio out there and occasionally I'd go over there and sit in Bill's studio with Bill and that's how I knew that he had Alzheimer's. I only came in the summers because I was teaching. One summer I went over to his place and we sat in these two big chairs he had and looked at what was on the easel and sat around and talked, and the next summer I went over and I sat in the same chair and he sat in the same chair and he started exactly the same conversation. I was heartbroken because I realized that's a sign of Alzheimer's. That's what made me so angry when they had this show recently [*De Kooning: A Retrospective*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011–12]. All these art critics claimed these were the best paintings of his life, but they were awful. They were done when he was already sick with Alzheimer's. I could have killed them. I guess it doesn't matter. But I could tell that Bill would never cross two lines like that. Never. There would always be a space. He made use of space. They didn't notice and they said it was the best work of his life. It was at MoMA. I thought that was a disgrace. But let's say I was

angry enough to try to say something about it, nobody would have cared what I thought and they wouldn't have given me space to say it. They may not even know my name, who knows.

I went to see the de Kooning show with Peter Selz, who ran the painting department for at least twelve years and the bookstore was full of books by him. When I said to the woman, who wasn't young, she was at least fifty, "This is Peter Selz," she said, "Who?" He was standing right next to me. I felt mortified. To think, he spent so much of his life and it was he who did that and they were all making money off of what he did and they don't remember his name? That's America. That is really America. That day I really didn't like America and I didn't like MoMA at all. It turns out it's worse than I thought. Now they're going to tear down or they did already, that five-year old building across the street, by [Ricardo "Rick"] Scofidio and these two famous architects. [Note: American Folk Art Museum, New York, built in 2001] Did you read about that?

Q: No.

Ashton: There's a building across from MoMA, diagonally across the street [note: next door] that Scofidio and his partner [Elizabeth Diller] built only five years ago and MoMA is tearing it down. I thought that was unbelievable, unbelievable, and nobody says a word. Not that I've seen. Nobody's made a petition. Nobody called me to protest. No, it's just going to be torn down. It's only five years old. They're very famous. Rick Scofidio is known throughout the world and Elizabeth Diller. She's also very famous. What's going on here? Not good. Not good.

Q: Have you observed changes in your students?

Ashton: In the students.

Q: You've talked about feeling like the world is changing and you've been a teacher, so do see that change amongst the different cohorts from year to year?

Ashton: I don't really because it goes more or less like this. There are always a few students who want to get to know me. I always have office hours and they come and they tell me their problems or sometimes they ask me to come and look at their work. I always do if they ask. But not much lately. They haven't asked. They call me by my first name and when I came into the building and the guy at the front desk would say, "Good morning, professor," I'd say, "Where, where, where?" Professor? Me? [Laughs] But the students, you asked me, have they changed? I don't know them that well. I only know the ones who want to know me and the rest of them sit there and usually they're not very active. At Cooper they're quite dependable. They seem to do the homework and they all have to write a term paper. I have to read them all. [Laughs] So sometimes they come to see me about their papers. But I would say that the relationship with teachers now is not as wholesome as it was. Everything is by the book and everything is who makes more money and the bureaucracy keeps growing. That I hate. They don't need it. For three years I ran Cooper Union with no bureaucracy, just me, a secretary, the head of the architecture department, and the head of the painting department. It just went. What's to do? What's the big deal? Why do they need five or ten bureaucrats? At Cooper now well, thank god they're getting rid of this absolutely incompetent president the trustees put there. He's unbelievably stupid and did bad things. Everything was upset and they are still. I think they can't

get rid of him for another two semesters for technical reasons, so the place is not in good shape.

There was something in the *Times*, it's somewhere here, about Cooper Union and it wasn't good news.

Q: After the Dante project with Bob, were there other interactions, other times that your life intersected with his?

Ashton: Well, Bob moved to Florida. So I didn't see him much, because he didn't invite me to come to Florida. I don't remember, if he did I might have gone, but I didn't. I saw a lot less of him. And even, his friend, the painter.

Q: [Robert] Petersen?

Ashton: No. The guy who did all the black and white paintings. I forget. Anyway. I didn't see either of them much after that because Bob very rarely, it seemed, came to New York. If he did, he didn't get in touch with me. He would always be friendly, but I had no reason to keep up with him and I was working through Castelli, of course, who was paying the bills. Then Castelli went out of business or, that is to say, he handed it over to, I forget, somebody else.

Q: Well, I think I've exhausted my questions.

Ashton: Yes?

Q: Yes. Yes, I think so. Thank you.

Ashton: You're welcome. I hope it was helpful.

Q: Yes, really helpful.

Ashton: Well, if you have any more you can always call me and tell me and I'll try to answer.

Q: Okay.

Ashton: The important thing to remember is they didn't think of themselves as Abstract Expressionists. They were just painters. Or sculptors. And they hung out. Like with David Smith, he had an uptown life and a downtown life and they were not connected. He would go and eat baked beans from the can. There was a painter, a very weak painter, not a very good painter, called Herman Cherry, and Herman had a basement studio not far from here, maybe three blocks away. When David was uptown visiting Helen, he usually came downtown to have baked beans and sit on the floor in this cold, damp cellar with Herman Cherry. Then they'd call me and I lived only two blocks away and I'd go over and eat baked beans with them. There's a photograph of me and David. My brother took that photograph. It's in a book called *The Unknown Shore: A View of Contemporary Art* [1962], there's a picture of David Smith and I think it's with me. I'm almost sure. I think my youngest brother took it. David was always good company. I must say I did admire David and I liked his work a lot. I think I wrote quite a bit about his work, didn't I?

Q: Yes.

Ashton: You would know.

[Laughter]

Ashton: I don't remember but he was, to me, the sculptor in the group.

Q: All right well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]