

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Peter MacGill

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Peter MacGill conducted by Brent Edwards on September 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: Peter MacGill

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Brent Edwards

Date: September 29, 2015

MacGill: Oh, Bob would be very impressed with this stuff.

Q: With the equipment?

MacGill: Yes, absolutely.

Q: I'm Brent Edwards and I'm thrilled to be here. It is September 29, 2015 with Peter MacGill.

We are in the Pace/MacGill Gallery [New York]. Thank you for letting us do the interview here. I know that Pace/MacGill started in 1983, but in terms of Rauschenberg, part of the story I don't have is how you met Rauschenberg. I have the chronology of exhibitions that you did with him and I'm hoping we can just go through some of the work you did with him, but I actually don't know how you met him and how he started showing here.

MacGill: Well, like any person with eyes—

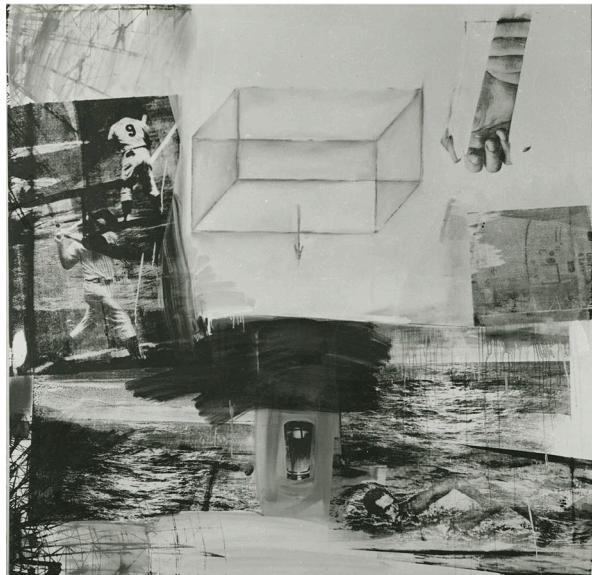
[Laughter]

MacGill: Growing up, I was profoundly awakened by, moved by, and challenged by looking at Bob's work, in museums and publications, stuff like that. Also, my partner [Richard] Dick

Solomon—I have two partners, [Arnold] Arne Glimcher and Dick Solomon—has one of the great black-and-white silkscreen paintings which used to hang above his bed. It was always such an incredible marvel to me, when you'd walk into his bedroom, there'd be Roger [Eugene] Maris [Brace, 1962]—

[Laughter]

MacGill: —his homerun swing and this incredible Rauschenberg.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Quarry*, 1962  
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas  
60 x 60 inches (152.4 x 152.4 cm)  
Private collection

Also, my family and I vacationed on Captiva [Florida].

Q: Really?

MacGill: It was always known that Bob Rauschenberg lived on Captiva. I knew his son, Christopher [Rauschenberg], through photography and through Robert Frank. Christopher, when he started Blue Sky Gallery [Portland, Oregon]—it's my understanding he started it, but he's certainly been there since the beginning—he had the best annual presents anybody had ever seen —refrigerator magnets, stuff like that. When I figured out that his dad lived on Captiva and we were vacationing there, it must have been 1985—'85 or '86, but I think it was '85—I called Christopher up and said, "Do you think I could possibly go meet your dad?" He said, "Of course." So Christopher called Bob and I went down the road to see him.

Q: Wow. Can I ask, where are you from originally?

MacGill: I was born in Indiana and when I was four, we moved to New York. My father was an Episcopal priest so we moved around a bit. It was exciting to grow up around New York in the sixties.

Q: Definitely, and Captiva—that went back to going there with your parents or do you mean your own family?

MacGill: No, absolutely not. As a kid, we were so poor that we would exchange churches with other parish priests and we ended up going to Florida in August.

[Laughter]

MacGill: They'd come up to New York. And we'd drive down from New York—

Q: A parish share.

MacGill: Yes, in a 1959 Chevrolet.

Q: So you'd been going down to Florida but—

MacGill: Yes, but never Captiva. A friend of ours recommended Captiva and 'Tween Waters Inn [Island Resort & Spa]. We started going there in '85.

Q: Wow. [Laughs] So how did that initial encounter turn into representation?

MacGill: Oh, it was fabulous. It was probably typical Bob, if I have to drill down on it. So I went to see Bob and I saw him probably three or four times during the week we were there and it was all hunky dory because it was like this is Bob Rauschenberg! His photographs are incredible and because I'm a photography person, I look at them as the foundation upon which his life's work is built. It's part of it, at least. Photography provides a couple of the really important stones. So I was just blown away to see what he did, what he had, and we talked about things that we could

maybe do together. Everything was great. I thought we were done. And then on the last day, I went to say goodbye to him and he looked at me and just said, “Why should I do this with you?”

[Laughter]

MacGill: I had had a series of visits and meetings with Bob and his staff which I thought were great and I looked at a lot of pictures. I went all over Captiva, to his different houses to see stuff stored in different places. Opening the drawers was serious business for Rauschenberg. Bob didn't take it lightly that somebody, who was clearly taken with his work, wanted to do something with it in New York. He kept the pressure on me. His work was not going to be shipped out without very serious consideration. I guess the test was passed and the studio sent pictures up on consignment. I could look up the records to see what we started with, but then we began doing shows.

Q: [Laughs] Beyond why he should do it with you, did you have convincing to do from his perspective, in relation to his own work? Did he think of himself as a photographer when you said, “I have a photo gallery; I want to do a show.” Did he say, “But I'm a painter. But I'm—”

MacGill: No.

Q: How did he react?

MacGill: Like I said, your equipment would have fascinated him. Whether he would have picked it up and worked with it, I don't know, but he was interested in everything. He didn't need to be convinced of the concept. He needed to be convinced of the players. Which, if somebody tests you, is always a good thing.

Q: Yes. The [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation doesn't have full information for all the shows he did with you, but I have some about most of them. It looks to me like that first show was in 1988—from January to March '88 and it was called *Rauschenberg: New Pictures*. It looks like it included some of the *Bleacher Series* [1988–91] and some of the series of what were called Polacolors [1987]. I wanted to ask about that first show. How did you figure out what you were going to put in the show?



Robert Rauschenberg  
*From the Bleacher Series: Chinese Bicycles*, 1988  
Manipulated black-and-white Polaroid  
on aluminum  
23 x 28 inches (58.4 x 71.1 cm)  
Private collection



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Apartments*, 1987  
Polacolor II  
24 x 20 inches (61 x 50.8 cm)  
From an edition of 11 unique variants,  
published by PaceMacGill, New York  
WestLicht Collection, Vienna

MacGill: Well, with Bob, everything was forward-looking. The front room had Polaroid 20-by-24 [inch] pictures that he had made. The thing about the Polaroid 20-by-24 camera is that it was a studio camera. It was made to take pictures inside with artificial light. The only other photographer I knew of who had ever taken this thing outside was Ansel Adams and Ansel started with Dr. [Edwin H.] Land, I think, in '47 or '48, because Dr. Land was very interested in getting the artists to teach him what his materials could and couldn't do. It was a very enlightened approach. I think this is part of how we got our relationship going—Bob said, "I would like to use the 20-by-24 camera," or we said, "Do you want to use the 20-by-24 camera?" Pace/MacGill was doing a lot with the artists we represented and Polaroid at that point. Bob said, "I'd love to use it but I'd like to photograph outdoors in Miami."

[Laughter]

MacGill: Bob could have said, “I want to get it to the moon,” and they would have done it. Polaroid was in the position that it wanted to do what this great artist wanted to do. So we traveled around Miami. Bob had a person who was there ahead of him, a location scout, and he made this body of work with the 20-by-24, which was very difficult to use, technically, because, again, this camera is meant to stay inside. Using it out of doors was pure Rauschenberg.

One night we were going out to dinner in—I don’t know if it was his car or Polaroid’s car, but it was a rented Mustang convertible. I’m sure you’ve heard that if dinner was scheduled for eight o’clock, Bob left the house or the hotel at eleven.

[Laughter]

MacGill: So we’re driving to dinner at eleven. The top is down. He’s in the front seat and John Reuter is driving. John was the technician from Polaroid. Bob said, “What happens if you take a black-and-white Polaroid and you coat it selectively and leave it in the sun?” Do you remember the Polaroid at that time?

Q: Yes.

MacGill: You’d peel it away and then you had to put that stinky stuff on it?

Q: Yes.

MacGill: John said, “Well, it would probably fade.” He said, “Good. I want to work on a project where I can selectively work with the image and have part of it fade away and part of it remain intact.” So we were going. And then we booked this show. So the front room was the Polaroid outdoor Miami pictures and then the interior gallery space was *Bleachers*. The problem was leaving the pictures in the sun to fade didn’t work because you needed intense sun over a prolonged period of time to get these things to change. It was a big deal for us to show Rauschenberg, a very big deal, and it was Thursday, one week ahead of the exhibition, and the work didn’t exist.

[Laughter]

MacGill: It didn’t exist. So the Monday morning before the Thursday we opened, Bob called me up at like two in the morning. “We got it. We’re calling them *Bleachers*.” I said, “Help me here.” He said, “We pour bleach on them and they disappear exactly the way I want them to or I keep relief on them so the image stays.” To really speed the story up, he made them on Monday morning. They came up to New York. We had a mounter mount them to aluminum and Bob’s former framer from Captiva fabricated the frames, and we opened up on Thursday and we sold the show out.

Q: Wow.

MacGill: Because it was unlike anything anybody had ever done before, of course. It was a total invention with some control thrown in. And the control came from his ability to harness unlikely events.

[Laughter]

MacGill: It was nuts.

Q: He knew he wanted them mounted?

MacGill: Oh yes and I said, “This is amazing, Bob, that the show got prepared perfectly in such a short amount of time.” He said, “I have good people.” It wasn’t, “Yes, I know, they’re great.” He had collected a truly remarkably group of people who worked with him. He had every confidence in them to pull this off in such a short amount of time. I’d never seen anything like it.

[Laughter]

MacGill: Have you been up to the warehouse?

Q: No.

MacGill: You have to go. You can't—

Q: I've heard about it. I read the article about it recently.

MacGill: Yes, it's the manifestation of Bob.

Q: So let me take you a couple steps back. The idea to collaborate with Polaroid, you suggested that? You said, "I've been doing a lot of stuff with Polaroid."

MacGill: I think so. If it's important, I'll call [John] Reuter and we'll try to figure that out.

Q: Well, it's a long time ago.

MacGill: Yes. I don't possess the memory of who initiated it. I think I probably did, but if you want to run with it, I would research it and find out.

Q: Well, I'll ask the Foundation people if they want to. And these were the two—

MacGill: Yes.

Q: —elements of the show? The large-format Polaroids and then the—

MacGill: The *Bleachers*.

Q: The *Bleachers*. Now, just back to the technical aspects because I understand the ratio you mentioned, but is the thing on a tripod? Is the camera in a truck?

MacGill: It's on a tripod in a truck and then they take it off. Sometimes they back the truck up and just leave it on the truck, and other times they take it down the ramp and off. But the camera—you have to understand—

Q: So it's a huge thing.

MacGill: —the camera back, where the film is exposed, is 20-by-24 inches. The bellows could come from here, if this is the focal plane, to the wall, but the focus— Because Bob was photographing stuff that was not right in front of it, the bellows would be certainly extended from where I'm sitting to where you're sitting.

Q: Wow and so he would be in the truck or behind the tripod. Do you focus it?

MacGill: Composing, sure—composing and focusing.

Q: Well, we were looking at some different examples of these at the Foundation. They have a number of the prints and the prints are noticeably different in terms of exposure, in terms of coloration.

MacGill: That's filtration, see?

Q: So he was making choices with the Polaroid guy, helping him—

MacGill: They were working together. I would have to say that if the materials took him some place odd and if Bob liked it, they'd go down that path. I don't think Rauschenberg had preconceived ideas that the world has a color bar and we have to match it. I think that if he could go somewhere and learn from going there and do something new, he'd do it.

Q: Yes. Do you remember—these prints—it's a Polaroid? They'd come out immediately?

MacGill: And you'd peel it back, yes.

Q: Would you have to treat it or coat it or anything or is it—

MacGill: Not color; the black-and-white you would, the color you didn't. They even had a bigger camera, 40-by-80 [inches], which was a room in the Museum of Fine Arts [Boston]. So the print

would come out and the technicians would literally walk the picture out. Sixty seconds later, they'd peel it back and there was the 40-by-80 photograph.

Q: Wow and was the paper on a roll?

MacGill: Yes.

Q: It also looks like it was cut from a roll.

MacGill: Yes, Reuter would just take a sharp knife and cut it.

Q: Do you remember him making markings on the bottom? Because it has some markings. It looks like this says "Flare." There are some that say "Test."

MacGill: I don't know—is that Bob's handwriting or is that Reuter's writing?

Q: We're not sure.

MacGill: Well, if it's Bob's, they can identify it. I think that looks like Reuter's handwriting.

Q: They didn't think it was Bob's.

MacGill: Yes, so it's probably John Reuter's.

Q: So this would be the technician—

MacGill: Yes.

Q: —making notations about which exposures or which technical aspects he preferred, what the right mix was?

MacGill: Yes. Look at that. I'm looking at it on your computer screen, across the room, on its side; it's a fucking great Rauschenberg.

Q: Yes. This is just taken with my iPhone. Now, the other ones, the *Bleachers*—were these taken with the same camera?

MacGill: Yes.

Q: So the format of these Polaroids that are then bleached and collaged or affixed to the aluminum—they're color originally or—

MacGill: No, black-and-white. Each one of those panels is 20-by-24 inches.

Q: Okay, so with this camera—you could use either color or black-and-white and he said, “I want to do some color, outdoor scenes.”

MacGill: This black-and-white stuff came from the idea that he wanted to be able to manipulate the image with significant fading, bleaching.

Q: But bleaching to him didn’t mean bleaching color?

MacGill: No.

Q: One could suspect that this could have been a color photograph originally—

MacGill: That got bleached.

Q: —and that he wanted to white-out the photo.

MacGill: A very, very good assumption, but incorrect.

Q: He had that clear in his head. He said, “I want black-and-white film to do—”

MacGill: Yes, because he knew the material. He knew that you peeled it and then if you didn't coat it, it would go away. It would fade. But the problem was the schedule. It didn't fade as quickly as he had hoped for.

Q: Wow. [Laughs] So the color ones you already had. And that last minute epiphany was with the *Bleachers*? Those were the ones that came in between the Monday and the Thursday. Wow. Well, that's quite the beginning to a collaboration.

MacGill: Oh, it's unbelievable, unbelievable. And it was the beginning. We would take the studio out to dinner on Captiva. We didn't have a penny. It would end up, "Bob, would you like to have dinner?" "Yes, can I bring—" "Yes." So it would be like fifteen people. I'm looking.

[Laughter]

MacGill: We would bring our son, who was six months—less than a year old at the time. Bob was fascinated with the baby, to a point. It was cute and wonderful because I think he liked babies.

[Laughter]

MacGill: Then, after a while, it was like a distraction from his getting on with—and it was very sweet, the last time I saw him—there is a very sweet story about our son.

Q: Do you want to tell it?

MacGill: Arne threw a party for Bob\ and Bob was wheelchair-bound and not in good shape. As we were leaving, my son, who is six-five, bent down to kiss Bob and Bob said, “You wait a minute.” He looked at Jasper [Johns] and he looked at Merce [Cunningham] and he looked at [John] Cage, and he said, “This boy grew up on my lap.” It was just this wonderful—as important as it was to us as a family to hear this, see this, was wonderful to learn that it meant something to Bob. And I don’t think these kinds of thoughts were insincere. It was very sweet. Then, our daughter got into Brown University [Providence, Rhode Island], early admission, because her essay was about the indomitable spirit of an artist she admired and had the privilege of seeing in the studio a couple times a year for her entire life. Of course it was about Bob, who remained unnamed in the essay.

Q: She didn’t name him? She just described the—

MacGill: No, because that would be funky. It’s like—

Q: Well, it’s name-dropping, I guess.

MacGill: Totally.

Q: So she just described him.

MacGill: You Ivy Leaguers—

[Laughter]

MacGill: You've got to be careful.

Q: Well, that's how we are—insider club. So it was just describing the intensity of a studio visit.

MacGill: The changing, because at first it was all about her love of the objects he had sitting around. Then it was how he incorporated the objects into his artwork and then it was how his physical problems limited how he could do it, but the work continued and was a contributing factor. It was a good essay.

Q: Did she end up going into art?

MacGill: Yes. She has a jewelry company and Bob would just love that. She worked at David Yurman and now she has her own company that's going. She makes everything. Well, she has a couple people manufacturing. But anyway—

Q: Okay, back to these technical questions, which I hope are not too tedious but they're really helpful, and the kinds of things the Foundation wants to try to get as much information about as possible. The Polacolors, the color Polaroids—as I understand it, they're in small editions. How was that handled?

MacGill: Well, they weren't editions.

Q: Single images?

MacGill: They were single. So, if you see five examples of one subject, Bob might have moved the camera a little bit or the focus might have changed or the exposure might have changed or the color might have changed. I don't recall totally, but knowing how it would have worked, they would have built up to the point where Bob was satisfied and maybe made a couple. But, even if you made a couple, we talked about pulling them apart, the wind could have blown and dust could have blown and stuff like that. So you were never guaranteed of banging out three or four once you got to that place.

Q: Right, so they're individual works.

MacGill: They're unique works of art. And if it was finished, meaning Bob was happy with it, there was, for sure, one. Also, when you pull, it could be crooked; you probably saw some that aren't the full area.

Q: Yes.

MacGill: That's because it didn't get pulled correctly. It just was a byproduct of this nutso process.

Q: [Laughs] I understand. So the collaboration starts there. How did it move forward? The next show I see is a group show in '91 and then a solo show in '97.

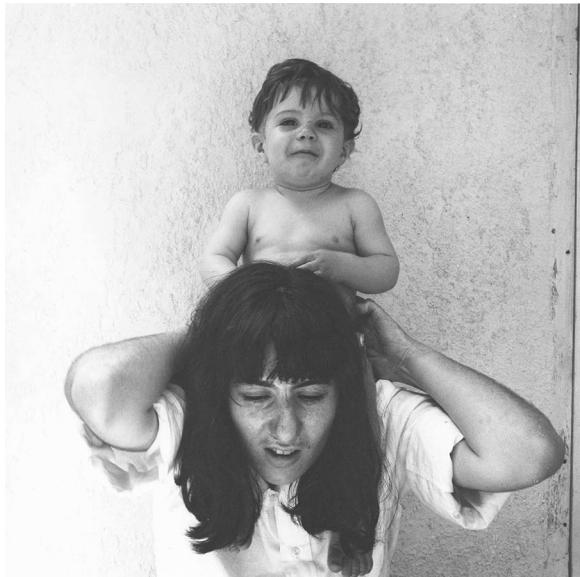
MacGill: What was the group show?

Q: *Family Pictures* [1988].

MacGill: Oh yes, that was great, and we had the picture of [Susan] Sue Weil holding Christopher [*'Topher and Sue*, 1952] and the life-size cyanotype print of Sue.

Q: An old picture?

MacGill: Yes, it was an old picture. Uncle Remus here—there's a story about that. Harry Callahan was at Black Mountain [College, North Carolina] with Bob and I showed the picture to Harry. He said, "I held that baby."



Robert Rauschenberg  
*'Topher and Sue*, 1952  
Gelatin silver print  
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Q: [Laughs] At Black Mountain?

MacGill: Yes. So when I told Bob that, Bob started crying. It was just sweet.

Q: Wow. That was a show you were putting together with other photographers, obviously.

MacGill: Correct.

Q: You asked him, “Do you have an old family photo?”

MacGill: Yes, or we might have had the picture. “Would you mind if we include it in the show?”

Q: Was that a point at which you were starting to—because later you started to reprint some of the early photos. Were you already doing that in '91?

MacGill: No, what we were doing was—Bradley [Jeffries], have you talked to Bradley?

Q: I haven't, no. I don't know whether they have.

MacGill: I don't know what's happening now. Bradley was really an integral part of the enterprise and was just incredible. Her husband made the gelatin silver prints for Bob at that point and they were perfect. Before seeing them, Bob would work with Emil [Fray] to make the prints beautiful. I'd go down there, I'd look at the contact sheets, I'd choose pictures. He'd go, "Yes, that's a good one. No."

[Laughter]

MacGill: From my observations, Bob was always paying attention and so we'd make the prints or Bradley's husband—his name was Emil—would make the prints.

Q: So you were interfacing with Bradley. I knew that she was the point person and that was already ongoing by the late eighties.

MacGill: Yes.

Q: Were you already doing that kind of—

MacGill: Yes. Terry Van Brunt, he was involved too.

Q: In that same process?

MacGill: Yes, because we wouldn't bother Bob with the lead-up to a final selection. I'd work on it with them. Then he, of course, would have to absolutely approve or disapprove and then it would go back to us plebes. We'd get this stuff done and we'd show it.

Q: What were numbers, if you remember going back to that early period? How many times were you doing that? How many negatives were you pulling out?

MacGill: We have all the paperwork except we had a warehouse fire. I don't know if it got destroyed or not. But we have the receiving paperwork so it's always very easy to go back and see what we did.

Q: But is it dozens, hundreds, or is it just a handful?

MacGill: Dozens.

Q: Dozens? Okay. Do you remember, in terms of that vetting process when you'd actually show the prints to Bob, did he have any interaction with Bradley's husband—with the printer?

MacGill: Sure.

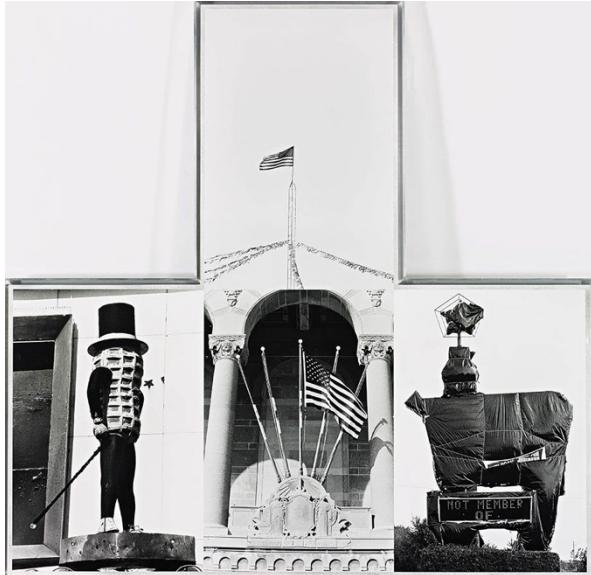
Q: Did he say, "This is too dark, can you bring out this quality in it?"

MacGill: You'll have to ask Bradley. I would select and submit my selections for his approval and then the prints would be made. I think maybe, if I recall correctly, a couple of them came up here and I said, "These aren't really where they need to be," but they didn't come here unless Bob had signed them, okay, so they had gone through his approval process. It would have been sort of ballsy to stand up and say, "Well, I think this is too dark or it's too light," or something like that. I think, again, he was a hands-on guy and, as I quoted Bob earlier, he had good people.

Q: Yes. So you wouldn't bother him, but then when he was involved, he was really involved.

MacGill: Totally.

Q: Okay. Around that same period, as I understand it, you started working with him on the *Photem Editions* [1991]. The original *Photems* date from about a decade before, from the early eighties [1981], but then editions were made. Whose idea was that? How did that process come about?



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Photem Series I #6 (edition)*  
Gelatin silver prints mounted on aluminum  
47 x 48 inches (119.4 x 121.9 cm)  
From an edition of 5, published by  
PaceMacGill, New York

MacGill: I was always asking to see more and more of Bob's photographs. They had a warehouse right across from the place on Lafayette Street, maybe on Bond Street. They had a warehouse.

Q: By the Foundation?

MacGill: Well, by Lafayette Street, his home. There's the parking lot and I think right across—

Q: That's Great Jones.

MacGill: Great Jones. There used to be a diner—great meatloaf sandwiches—on the corner, and then next to the diner, a couple doors in, they had a warehouse. They had his BMW, the painted car [*Art Car-BMW*, 1986], in there. They had all these photos, so I went in there and I'm like, Jesus.

[Laughter]

MacGill: This is something he and Ileana [Sonnabend] had done. I said, “Can we choose a handful of these and make an edition?” We didn’t need to work with Emil long distance because we had a lab in White Plains, New York that would do anything we asked them to do. So they made the prints. By then, I guess we had Bob’s trust.

Q: What were the numbers? Small numbers?

MacGill: I think they were editions of five.

Q: Okay and that was the 1991 show?

MacGill: Whatever you have there.

Q: Well, it looks like the ’91 [*Robert Rauschenberg*] included more *Bleachers*. Would you have shown more *Bleachers* a few years later? Does that make sense?

MacGill: Sure.

Q: That's according to the records they have, but I also have the date of the *Photem* editions as '91.

MacGill: They're beautiful because a lot of the ones—not a lot—some of the ones that Ileana produced were changing. They weren't processed correctly. It is somebody's fault, but we find that a lot of stuff that was made in the seventies to archival standards turns brown or pink. It's not like labs weren't trying to do the best they could, but there has been some fallout.

Q: Right, well, which might have tickled him.

[Laughter]

Q: Knowing Rauschenberg, it might be exactly what he wanted. Did those sell well, the *Photem Editions*?

MacGill: Yes, they did. We sold them, but they didn't fly out of here. Because I think, again, he's just so far out there. Also, people, I think—well, I just thought of this. The last work he made when he was directing—was it Darryl [R. Pottorf]'s brother [Kevin Pottorf] who was the

last person working? Those transfers are just crisp and factual, whereas when he made the transfers, he used tons of water in the transfer process.

[Laughter]

MacGill: The color would squirt across the paper and they're incredibly manipulated, expressionistic. But at the end, when he couldn't make the transfers with the squirts and stuff himself, I looked at them as just being—and I don't know if I'm right or not—literal transfers of juxtaposed pictures on a big sheet of paper. Well, that's what the *Photems* were. There was really no expressionistic, gestural handwork in them. They are photographs glued together, that meant something because Bob had shaped them and juxtaposed them. They told visual stories so they were plenty deep, but they didn't have the handwork and I think people missed that; whereas the *Bleachers* had handwork.

Q: Right. Going back to something that you said earlier that I wanted to ask you to comment on further, you could argue that photography is one of the key elements, that, as a medium, is at the foundation of his work. How did you think about making choices? Because you could say, looking at Rauschenberg, photography is everywhere. Where is there no photography? Photography is across the board, so if you're thinking about your space and your public, your market, how did you say, "Well, the *Bleachers*—manipulated photographs, bleached-out photographs, pasted or fixed to aluminum—those fit, but certain other things might not fit." Was there a line that was too far away from photography for you?

MacGill: No, absolutely not. This is a horribly presumptuous thing to say, but we should be in collaboration with the artist we work with; good editors, that's all. We were able to see, with Bob, with Terry, with Darryl, with whomever, what the good stuff was, and that's what we showed.

Q: If you wouldn't mind being philosophical, why do you think—

MacGill: It's hard for me.

Q: [Laughs] Well, you might have thought about it at some point over this relatively long collaboration in this part of his work. Why do you think photography was so central to him? Why was it such a crucial medium for his work?

MacGill: Because it was there. It was the medium of our time. Bob, obviously, was older than I am, but not fifty years older. Photography was the way people learned about the world we live in and it was the most prevalent, important medium of the twentieth century. You could argue it was film or photo-based. After the Second World War, the launch or re-launch, re-establishment or establishment of the picture magazines. You've got three leading picture magazines and as a kid I knew which day those magazines were coming on, which was my favorite and why. There were pictures. Bob understood so clearly that cultural phenomenon and he loved it, I'm guessing, and he incorporated that phenomenon into his own work and the rest is history.

There's this incredible picture that we actually have hanging in our home. It's a street, a close-up of a street. It's a square picture and there's a white line and at the end of the white line, there's a little sign that says, "Stop." It's a stop sign that you run over. It looks like maybe it's in London or something. They have stuff embedded in the streets there. So it's a layup to describe this picture when people come through our house and they want to see our pictures. He is the link between Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. You cover up the stop sign and you've got this pure Barnett Newman. You cover up the line and you have Pop art. There's a stop sign.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*N.Y.C. (Stop)*, 1951  
Gelatin silver print

An edition of 10 inkjet prints was published  
by PaceWildensteinMacGill, New York, 1997

[Laughter]

MacGill: Re-contextualized; pure [Marcel] Duchamp. I just think he was so smart, so aware that photography was ours. It was his.

Q: It's part of the vocabulary.

MacGill: Totally.

Q: Do you think there was a distinction for him, in terms of his practice, between found photography, between repurposed things, collages from magazines and newspapers of one sort or another, and his own photography when he's doing something with a photo he's taken? Is that the picture?

MacGill: That's an unanswerable question and it's a great question. Did he go to Yankee Stadium and photograph Roger Maris? No. Did he photograph [John Fitzgerald] Jack Kennedy? I don't know, but I don't think he did.

Q: I don't think so. [Laughs]

MacGill: That work simply wouldn't exist without appropriation. He loved Duchamp, so the re-contextualization of commonly seen images— But then he also loved taking pictures. We have this portfolio we published of what he called the postcard pictures because of the shape of the negative; long and narrow, like a postcard. The guy's brilliant. In the last show we did [*Robert*

*Rauschenberg and Photography*, 2013], which got that great review in the *New York Times* [Philip Gefter, “Transmuting Forms, Click by Click,” October 20, 2013], we had a 1950, 1952 photograph next to a 1979 painting or something like that. The works were structurally identical. The way he imposed the frame on this swamp and layered the progression of information was identical to what he was doing thirty years later on a painting, probably not even thinking about that picture. But it was the exercising of his art-making ability and he was a natural.



Robert Rauschenberg  
Untitled [statue and branches], ca. 1952  
Gelatin silver print



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Postcard Self-Portrait, Black Mountain (II)*, 1952  
Gelatin silver print

These were included in a portfolio of seven vintage photographs, *Portfolio I* (1952/1998), published by PaceWildensteinMacGill.

Q: Yes, of his eye. Thank you. I'm sorry to make you philosophize but—[laughs]

MacGill: No, it's a pleasure. It's Rauschenberg.

Q: Let me keep taking you through the chronology. So '97 [*Robert Rauschenberg: Photographs*, PaceWildensteinMacGill, New York], I think, is the next one and I think in this one you featured early photos—

MacGill: Yes.

Q: —some of those photos going back to the fifties. As I understood, it coincided with the big retrospective. Was that a plan? Did he think, I'm doing this—the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum [New York; *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, 1997–98]—this big retrospective, and I want to do some other part of my work in a gallery at the same time?

MacGill: No. I think Pace/MacGill probably, crassly, coat-tailed the situation. But, I think that those were digital prints, a huge and wonderful leap. If there was a new technology, my opinion is that Bob would seize it. He would embrace it. He would cherish it. So suddenly we had been making digital prints for Chuck Close, [William] Bill Wegman, I can't remember, a bunch of people beginning in the nineties. What year is that?

Q: It's '97.

MacGill: Yes, so I asked, “Bob, can we make some digital prints so you can see them?” And we did. I personally was involved in the proofing and then would send them down to him when we thought we had them perfect. He loved them. When he and Walter [C.] Hopps came to the show—Bob had seen the prints, but when they were framed and on the wall, it was very special. They just couldn’t believe it. Walter—to say he knew Bob’s work is an understatement—and Bob could just see shit in the prints that they had never seen before because the digital materials and process allow you to render more of what’s in the negative than does the analogue gelatin silver process. It was very cool.

Q: So the family picture show in ’91—that photo of his wife and son—that would have been a gelatin silver print?

MacGill: A silver print, exactly.

Q: Then, in that decade, you start doing—is this Iris? Is it that technology?

MacGill: Well, yes, sure. I call it ink on paper, pigment on paper. So I don’t know if those were Iris prints. I don’t know what the hell they were. We just need to look it up or ask David Adamson, “What was that?”

Q: A digital—it’s an inkjet printer that you’re doing through a computer?

MacGill: Correct. So they would scan the negative. The negative simply holds more information than a gelatin silver print could deliver. Got it? In the negative, I could count how many whiskers are in this square inch. In the analogue print made from that negative, you could not count them because there's a loss and the photographer saw the loss and loved it and embraced it. So it wasn't a lament. It was the end of the analogue materials. Those were the materials. So, suddenly, you could say, "Okay, if this stuff is in the negative, it can be delivered in a digital print." It was a revelation.

Q: Let me see if I have them here. They're these? —It's terrible in my little iPhone photo, but when I saw them at the Foundation, they're strikingly different.

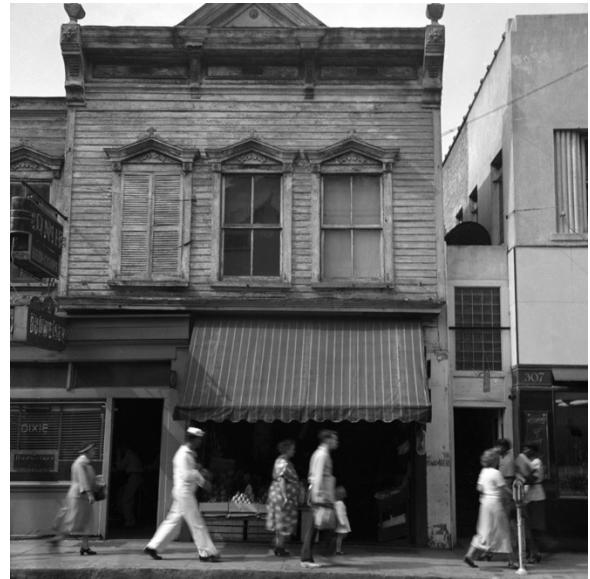
MacGill: Yes, that's an inkjet.

Q: This one, the Merce Cunningham one I love.

MacGill: That's inkjet. See, there are people in the shadow areas and then Bob—this is Charleston—Bob would say, "God, I never knew there was anybody in there." Because you look at the gelatin silver print and it's very beautifully blocked. This picture is a Combine. This picture is a total Combine. People are stuck to the front, the awning, in an ambiguous picture space. Come on, it's incredible.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Merce*, 1952, 1997  
Black-and-white digital inkjet print  
19 x 19 inches (48.3 x 48.3 cm)  
From an edition of 10, published by  
PaceWildensteinMacGill, New York



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Charleston Street*, 1952, 1997  
Black-and-white digital inkjet print  
23 x 23 inches (58.4 x 58.4 cm)  
From an edition of 10, published by  
PaceWildensteinMacGill, New York

Q: Well, there's a layering to it. You can see someone a few feet back. Was there a shift in  
formatting because it looks—

MacGill: These are square negatives. These are 2 1/4-by-2 1/4 [inches].

Q: But the gelatin silver prints of these—

MacGill: Are square.

Q: They would be the same?

MacGill: They were smaller. Yes, these prints were a little bigger, yes.

Q: Yes, that's starting to be the *Bleachers*. Now, this is—again, it's something that you suggested to him.

MacGill: Yes.

Q: You said, "We are doing these great prints for Chuck Close."

MacGill: "It's phenomenal."

Q: "Do you want me to do some for you?"

MacGill: Yes.

Q: He said, "Yes, let's try?" Was there any kind of—he didn't leave behind doing gelatin silver prints?

MacGill: I don't know. I think he did. Maybe. But there had been a lot of portfolios published before we came around that were gelatin silver prints. I don't know that he went back to making gelatin silver prints because I think Bradley and Emil got divorced or—I think there—

Q: It was a shift for him.

MacGill: Yes. He was not one to hold on if he could change it and make it be better.

Q: That seems to be true [laughs] and that showed—

MacGill: [Laughs] At all levels.

Q: Yes. That show—the '97 show—those early photos—it would have been that. It would have been—

MacGill: Well and some new pictures. We had one picture, a 35-millimeter picture. I think it's Tokyo; he looked at out of his hotel room window. No, it was Canada. Anyway, he was traveling and on a roof outside of his hotel room are a pile of letters and numbers that came from one of those signs that you put the letters up to spell out something. So this picture is like Bob's alphabet.

[Laughter]

MacGill: Just sitting there in a giant jumble.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Vancouver, 1980, 1997*  
Black-and-white digital inkjet print  
21 x 28 3/4 inches (53.3 x 73 cm)  
From an edition of 10, published by  
PaceWildensteinMacGill, New York

Q: Was this a similar process where you would go down to Captiva and look through—

MacGill: Edit.

Q: —page proofs and—

MacGill: Yes.

Q: —look through proof sheets and choose. You wanted to choose a range.

MacGill: Yes.

Q: Were you almost thinking as a retrospective?

MacGill: Yes.

Q: We want to go back to your earliest photos and up to—

MacGill: Up to the—

Q: —the way you're using it now.

MacGill: Yes. But black-and-white was somewhat finite because he started making a lot of color pictures, transparencies.

Q: But the decision was, this show, was for it to be black-and-white.

MacGill: Correct.

Q: I see. Okay. Stop me if I'm going too fast. I don't want to take up too much of your time but I'm just taking you through the trajectory. There was another group show, *Big Pictures, Little Pictures* [1999].

MacGill: Yes.

Q: What was that?

MacGill: Big pictures, little pictures. [Laughs]

Q: A shift in format; big ones and small ones?

MacGill: There was a 40-by-80 Chuck Close diptych, so there were two panels, 40-by-80 inches. It's about the size of that wall, but it takes up a large portion of that wall, and next to it was a little Harry Callahan contact print.

[Laughter]

MacGill: It was very cool because everybody wanted big, big, big. I have no idea what we put in of Bob's. We have the checklist. I don't remember [note: Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Sue*, ca. 1950].



Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil  
*Sue*, ca. 1950  
Monoprint: exposed blueprint paper  
69 3/4 x 41 5/8 inches (177.2 x 105.7 cm)  
Private collection

Q: I don't think they had the checklist for that one. So it was about juxtaposition and scale and size.

MacGill: Yes.

Q: Then, there was, in 2002, another solo show of some of the *Photem Series*. The *Photem Series*—they say things like *Photem Series I #5*, but there's only one *Photem Series*, right?

MacGill: No, I think we drill down on this. If it's *Photem 2*, that's the stuff we made. *Photem I* would be the Ileana group. [Note: Sonnabend supported the original *Photem Series* in 1981, then

designated as *Photem Series I*; the 1991 editioned pieces, published by PaceMacGill, New York, retain the original titles with (*edition*) appended.]

Q: Okay. Let me get them to check.

MacGill: If you want me to get some answers to some of this stuff now, I can ask them.

Q: Maybe when we're done we can check on that, because their list of that show says, "*Photem Series I #1 (edition); Photem Series I #5 (edition)*," and I understood that to mean you're doing an edition of something that was in one of the—

MacGill: Earlier—

Q: Right, one of the earlier *Photem Series*. But I had understood that there only was one *Photem Series*. If it's easy to look in the records, maybe we can when we stop. Again, stop me if I'm jumping or going too quickly but— He shows up in a couple of other group shows, the 2011 group show called *Wanna See My Portfolio?* I don't know. What does that mean?

[Laughter]

MacGill: It's sort of dirty.

[Laughter]

MacGill: There was a thing in the seventies that everybody in the world wanted to be a photographer and then the next thing was everybody wanted to be a screenwriter. It was just waves. So the thing was to go to a Society for Photographic Education meeting or something like that and ask, “Want to see my portfolio?”

[Laughter]

MacGill: It was this line to get your work seen. “Want to see my portfolio?” So we showed the greatest portfolios that anybody ever did—Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, Bob Rauschenberg, Robert Frank. It was great. The press release was really good. I remember this one specifically. It was like we couldn’t sell pictures individually so we thought if we sold fifteen of them, we could make a little money for the artists.

[Laughter]

Q: Did it work?

MacGill: No.

[Laughter]

MacGill: Now, though, the best of these portfolios are worth a fortune.

Q: It was literally in a portfolio?

MacGill: Sure.

Q: So you would come into the space and find—

MacGill: A box.

Q: —portfolios laid out?

MacGill: A box. Well, for Bob—we made little—I don't know what you call them—folders with flaps over the pictures and nice strings.

Q: Could you open up and rifle through? How did people—

MacGill: Well, no, we'd show them ourselves. Witkin Gallery [New York] started in 1969—it ended up across the street in the Fuller Building. Lee had bins, like a record store.

[Laughter]

MacGill: So you'd go through them and you'd see Edward Weston, Jerry [N.] Uelsmann, Ansel Adams. The shit was in the bins in plastic bags and you'd just go through it.

Q: [Laughs] It doesn't sound like quite up to archival standards and preservation.

MacGill: No.

Q: Wow. Well, it's a great idea for a show. So it's like the dirty old man in the trench coat.

[Laughter]

MacGill: Right. "Want to see my portfolio?"

Q: It's a great idea. Then I think the last one that had a bunch of reviews is the one that's just called *Rauschenberg and Photography*.

MacGill: Right.

Q: In 2013. Can you talk about that and the conception of what you were trying to do there? Is that another retrospective?

MacGill: No. It was just—I don't know. I get sort of emotional because he was such a wonderful man. It was just a show that needed to be done. New York needed to see how there was not a divide between his photography and his painting. That's it. That's it. And the best example is of this small picture from the 1950s that was hanging next to this big black-and-white painting made twenty, thirty years later. Structurally the two works of art, a photograph and a painting, are identical—and that's what needed to be seen. Everybody's incredible. Christy [MacLear] was incredible. David [Newkirk White] was incredible. David and I have known each other for a long time. I think we're close. I love and respect David. However, David would not let me get everything I wanted for the show. I can't remember what the argument was about, but there were a couple things I wanted and he would not lend them. In the long run, the show was a collaborative effort and it worked out perfectly. It was brilliant and small, and I'm not saying, "Brilliant me." Or, "Brilliant us." It was Bob's work delivering the message. We were just showing some stuff in a very simple way to show the magic of this genius.

Q: Were you looking for those sorts of juxtapositions or making through-lines in his practice?

MacGill: No, I was just looking to assemble something which would illustrate the dialogue between photography and his painting. Letting the work teach us. I wasn't coming in there like with the *Big Picture, Little Picture*, which was a lot of fun. The fact of the matter is that in art, if you get a great work by this person and a great work by that person and I don't care if they're three hundred years apart, you can put them next to each other and there is going to be something exciting going on. With Bob, it's like the alphabet on the roof of that building. He was able to

bring together the most disparate things in the world so that they would make total sense as long as you let yourself be in his hands. When you walked into his studio, I think he had three televisions going. It was like, how the hell did he deal with all of this information?

Q: Too much information but not for him.

MacGill: Right and one of the great moments we had is when, outside of the studio family, we were the first people to see him sober after he came back from Betty Ford [Center, Rancho Mirage, California]. We went in and we were standing there as we always did. He would sit at the counter and we'd stand there and talk. Bob had a way of talking that was sort of like the numbers and letters on the roof; it seemed illogical unless you let it flow and let it make its own kind of sense. Okay? So he would say something that we'd hear as disjointed and everyone would laugh and then you'd go to the next one or you'd go back. So it was like a dialogue; but, at least for somebody with my limited intellectual capacity, I could spar a little bit with these incredible thoughts, but never totally grasp his language enough to make sense out of it to have an enlightened two-way dialogue. Bob would state, we'd listen and laugh and hopefully at some inspired moment form a retort to keep the conversation going. It all made sense, but it was his language not ours. The laughter was the vehicle to keep things moving forward. Well, when he was sober, after Betty Ford, he would say something and he'd look at you wanting a logical response, the laughter was missing and Bob expected a response!

[Laughter]

Q: He wanted the response.

MacGill: Like, I'd say, "Oh shit."

[Laughter]

MacGill: It's like, "I've got to go now. The kids are drowning in the pool." It was unbelievable.

Q: It's actually harder, maybe.

MacGill: Totally, totally.

Q: Was that on Captiva? Where were you?

MacGill: Yes, it was Captiva. He had just come home. He was unbelievably frail. But he bounced back. Indomitable.

Q: That's intense. I've read a good deal of his writing, which is also extraordinary. For someone who did not write a great deal, what he wrote is extraordinary, which gives me, as someone who never met him, a sense of his language, his grasp of language. But I hadn't heard that about his speaking style and that—

MacGill: It was like three monitors going at once because he just thought about stuff in the most enlightened, unique, personal, relevant way. He was—just amazing.

Q: So all that would come into his speech. Wow.

MacGill: His old studio on Laika Lane—Laika was the name of his dog. He had a studio that was, let's say, 900 square feet. Maybe it was bigger. He had a table. At this point, the aluminum he was painting and silkscreening on left a passageway of a couple feet all around. So the paintings were as big as the studio. I was there and I was blown away by what I saw—it was maybe six panels or something. So I leave and then the next visit, months later, I come back and the work is hanging in the house. There's this giant red splash of paint in the upper left-hand corner and I asked, ‘Bob, when you're working on this thing horizontally, how do you know that that needs to go there?’ He said, indifferently, ‘That's my job.’

[Laughter]

MacGill: He was serious. It was dismissive. “You fool, what do you mean, why, how?”

[Laughter]

MacGill: That was Bob for me. It was like, “That's my job.”

Q: [Laughs] Well, I guess there's a bluntness to it.

MacGill: Yes. His belief in what he was doing.

Q: But back to the photography issue, it's part of what's remarkable to be able to be that proficient in multiple mediums. Is that the way you handle— It's not just material that's different, but perspective-wise. With the painting or silkscreen you're working in a different way and a different scale and a different perception, and with a photograph, where you're framing—

MacGill: Imposing the frame on it.

Q: Yes, it seems like a completely—well, it is.

MacGill: It is completely, but he saw that. Maybe Leah Dickerman with the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York] show will talk about that [*Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*, 2017]. I don't know, but it will get talked about at some point—that the way he frames stuff with photography, because I'm a photography person, I believe that it is the foundation for his art-making.

Q: No, I'm convinced.

MacGill: Yes. That one we looked at on the side [Charleston] with that jumble of buildings, come on! That's perfect Rauschenberg.

Q: Yes, and a gorgeously framed image, yes.

MacGill: Yes.

Q: Well, I think, unless there are other things that you wanted to add or comments that you wanted to make—

MacGill: No, I just want to try to be of help to you and Bob in whatever way I possibly can.

Q: Well, thank you. This is really helpful and some of the background with the Polacolor stuff especially that they didn't have information about I think will be very helpful. All right. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]