

Interview of **ALICE DENNEY**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

February 11, 2011

Washington, DC

Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates. RRFA 08.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

INTERVIEWER: It is Friday, February 11th, 2011, and I'm speaking with Alice Denney.

You were saying...., you first met Bob ...

ALICE DENNEY: No. I bought that combine [CAGE, 1958] from Leo Castelli's bathtub¹, at East 77th Street, and I was with one of my friends from the Jefferson Place Gallery -- one of my artists, Mary Orwin. She liked it, too. And I brought it home, and my stable of artists couldn't stand it. They thought I'd gone off my rocker.

But I liked it. Then Leo -- I went back another time, to do the galleries -- and Leo said, "Would you like to meet Bob? You took such a liking, and bought the work of art out of the blue." And I said, "I would love to." He said, "Well, I'm going over there." So we went over there and saw Bob, in that studio of his. I can't remember the street, but you know the one. He was full of, oh you know, "Have lunch!" There wasn't much lunch [chuckles], but we had a great time chatting away.

At that time, I had my gallery -- the Jefferson Place -- and I thought, "Gosh. I'd like to show his work. At the time, I was showing Robert Goodnough, and some New York artists, along with my own artists, and he was still not -- he was reluctant. I think he wanted to make New York. I mean, what was Washington? [Chuckles]

So that's how I met him. Then when I left the Gallery of Modern Art to start the Washington Gallery of Modern Art,... I worked two years on that. ...

Oh, wait. In the meantime, there was a little committee of three of us on the President's Committee, when Jack Kennedy was President, and he wanted to do something for the arts. So Kay Halle, and V.V. Rankin and I went to see Jack Kennedy, and said, "Why don't you invite some artists to your inauguration?" "Good idea. Good idea. Who?" Well, I chirped up, "Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns." Unheard of. Nobody knew them. And V.V. said, "Oh, there goes Alice, pushing her artists." And then we settled on Franz Kline, and [Mark] Rothko, and Lassau as the three invited.

In the meantime, the Gallery of Modern Art opened in '62, with the Franz Kline retrospective, and Adelyn Breeskin said that I could have the next big show. And that's when I did the "Popular Image." In the meantime, I saw a lot of Bob Rauschenberg, in and out of New York, and I thought, "Well, along with the show, the Judson dancers." Accidentally, I put Bob

¹ Leo Castelli used the bathtub for storage.

on the program as a dancer. He said, "Well, what am I going to do?" I said, "Well, I'm sure you'll think of something to do." And as you know, that's when he decided to do the "Pelican," and danced with Carolyn Brown. I had no idea what he was going to do, but he said, "Find me a parachute." Well. And that was the parachute for Pelican.

He stayed here with Steve Paxton. They lived here for, I think, two weeks [chuckles] -- lots of drinking, lots of eating, and lots of giggles. He was a great house guest, and Steve was, too. They slept in the basement. He was very important to that whole Festival, as you can imagine. Remember the Theatre Rally they did? They did that after, I think --

INTERVIEWER: Yes. In 1965. They did the Theatre Rally after the Venice Biennale, and before the NOW Festival.

ALICE DENNEY: Okay, okay, right. He did the Turtle piece, then.

Okay. Okay. Well, anyway, it was that whole collage of happenings. Everybody -- the Judson dancers, Trish, Yvonne Rainer, we became... John Cage.

INTERVIEWER: Had you see the Judsons in New York? The Judson group?

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about it.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, you know, down at the church, they were just in their skivvies, and their sweat suits, and what have you. They just erased everything about dance, and it was all so minimal. And I liked all the people. There was something there, and it fit in with what I was trying to do. I'm not sure -- but the Pop Festival was very popular. We had a whole week of events. And that's how I got to know Bob Rauschenberg.

And, of course, he sent me Christmas gifts, and his little things, and the one thing where we all got one, and we finally had to put it together. You saw that. I think the only time it's been put together was at the Smithsonian Hopps show, I think.

INTERVIEWER: That was the piece where he made a painting, and cut it up into little pieces, ...

ALICE DENNEY: Yeah, and we didn't know what it would look like.

INTERVIEWER: Then he sent his friends, each, one of those pieces...

ALICE DENNEY: I must have five or six "things" -- photographs, that piece, a blue, I don't know, it's very -- cardboards. About six pieces that he sent.

Well, I don't know what else to say.

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask about being in New York and being at Bob's -- you had gone to his studio. Was it full of people? Was it just Bob?

ALICE DENNEY: Are we talking about the first time?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, the first time.

ALICE DENNEY: No, no, no, it was just Leo, and myself, and Bob. There weren't a lot of people. But other times, when we would go to visit, there was a lot of drinking, and a lot of people -- Thanksgiving dinners -- then George and I visited him (well, this is later) at Captiva. We spent three days there, and he was doing all the cooking, and the drinking, and I was doing the drinking, too.

Oh, back to the roller-skating rink. When we were looking for a space, I had nothing at the Gallery of Modern Art, of course, and I had been using tennis courts for "Ann Halperin," and so forth. But that didn't suit Bob. Bob became kind of the assistant of the Festival.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like he almost became your co-producer.

ALICE DENNEY: [Laughs] Practically. Yes. He was definitely terribly involved. We went to see the roller-skating rink. I think I'd used it once before for something local, and he loved it. The skaters were going about fifty miles an hour. And then his first thought was to call it "America on Wheels," and I said, "No, no, no. That's too Detroit." Then he wanted to do it for the NOW Festival. He wanted to call it "America on Wheels," and I said, "No, no, no! Let's call it the NOW Festival. What's going on now."

Anyway, we used the roller-skating rink for the "Pelican," and it worked very well. Then when we did the NOW Festival, I tied in the Festival with his piece -- the dancers, his partners, were different. Carolyn Brown didn't come in '66.

INTERVIEWER: She was there in '62. '63. She was there in '63.

ALICE DENNEY: Right. Alex was in '66, with Fahlstrom.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Did Bob know how to roller skate?

ALICE DENNEY: He learned in Brooklyn. He learned to roller skate in Brooklyn.

INTERVIEWER: In the stories that I read, it was that Bob was listed in the program as --

ALICE DENNEY: -- a dancer.

INTERVIEWER: They say "choreographer", and that Bob says, "Oh. Well. Gee. I might as well do that." But it doesn't sound like that's what actually happened.

ALICE DENNEY: I thought I listed him as a dancer. And that's why he thought he should be a dancer.

INTERVIEWER: And he ultimately did so.

ALICE DENNEY: Yes. Then he went and he learned to -- I don't know how that whole thing about the -- well, now, I think he had that image of the parachute.

ALICE DENNEY: I really had no idea what he was going to do until I got a call from him saying, "I need a para -- I need silk." Then it turned out that they did have a parachute. Then he told me he was going to roller skate around. I was worried about Carolyn Brown, you know, hurting in some way -- because Bob was not the best roller skater. So that was that.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a big success?

ALICE DENNEY: What? The Pop? Oh, yes. Oh, my. Every night people were out on the town. That was a huge success. The whole thing.

INTERVIEWER: A first for Washington.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, yes. And then the dancers in the roller-skating rink, danced until 2:00 in the morning, and everybody came. Pontus Hulten came, Hopps came, you know all the -- they said, "Oh, let's take it. Let's do the whole thing." And films. What else? A lecture by Robert Rosenblum, and John Cage. John we put up at the Gallery of Modern Art. We had no auditorium, and we rented these little chairs, these little stools, and during the lecture -- John Cage's lecture -- they started to crash down, and everybody thought it was part of the lecture. John loved it. He said, "I've got to get some of those chairs, and do it another time." [Laughs]

Well, that was the spirit of those crazy, wonderful days.²

You could never do that today.

INTERVIEWER: The way you set up the roller-skating rink -- people would move their chairs? Is that correct?

ALICE DENNEY: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: The audience moved, not the dancers?

² Alice Denny (3.1.11) said that when RR was in Washington, they were going from pool to pool in her neighborhood to swim and Bob at the end of the night said "Let's swim the Potomac." Alice, and her husband George, and Steve Paxton objected but Bob insisted. George and Steve drove to the other side of the Potomac, faced the car towards the river, parked it, and turned on the headlights so Bob had a "destination." Bob successfully swam across the Potomac. The next morning he was violently ill. [The Potomac River was dangerously polluted at that time; residents were warned not to go in it.]

ALICE DENNEY: No. Right. Everybody thought, "Oh, Yvonne Rainer -- she's going to do the nude thing." Then the police came, with dogs. Well...

INTERVIEWER: So. ... You had Bob Rauschenberg on your brain. You were immediately attracted to him.

ALICE DENNEY: I was very attracted to Bob. He had a sense of humor. He was just like -- I don't like to compare him with other artists. But I can honestly say that of all the artists I've known, and there have been a lot of them, that he was one of my favorites. Definitely. I mean, everything about Bob -- he was very, very bright. Well, you know, too. He was a very bright.... His sentences were fascinating. They were a work of art unto themselves.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely.

ALICE DENNEY: The way he looked at things, the way he saw, the way he looked at food. Well, yes. He was a foodie. [Laughs]

INTERVIEWER: He *was* a foodie.

ALICE DENNEY: I know. He did one (and I probably shouldn't even tell this, but it's a story) -- Bob Lehrman, I think it was, here, had a party after one of the events here, and Bob, of course, was invited. And he came to the party -- "Where's the Jack Daniels?" There was no Jack Daniels. He rudely left the party with his buddy. But I was horrified. I said, "Oh, Bob, you don't do this!" [Laughs] But, you know, he was wedded to that darn stuff.

INTERVIEWER: He did have that affection, I gather.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, see, he was supposed, he was supposed to give it up, but he just generally went into wine, which was no better for him. He tried a couple of times. Well, you know that. Don Saff tried. We all tried. But...

INTERVIEWER: After the Pop Festival, you went to ...

ALICE DENNEY: Venice.

INTERVIEWER: ...the State Department. Can you talk about that?

ALICE DENNEY: It's the first time that the State Department was in charge of the Venice Biennale, and Lois Bingham was head of USIA at the time. She was a woman, a professional government type. I knew Lois because she came to the Gallery of Modern Art. I knew her from the Jefferson Place [Gallery]. She came to me, she said, "You know, Alice, I am going to be in charge of the Venice Biennale, and we would love to have you be the Commissioner." I said, "Oh, I don't know." She said, "But the funds," (this is the truth) "have to go through the Gallery of Modern Art." But she said, "we don't want Adelyn Breeskin to be in charge, and she is director of the Gallery of Modern Art."

See, Adelyn and I had already had a tiff over the Popular Image show, the Tom Wesselmann painting. And I said, "Well --" And then Lois said, "It *can't* go through the Gallery of Modern Art." I said, "Well, listen. Alan Solomon helped me with this Popular Image, and he is on the scene. He knows everything, and he's at the Jewish Museum. Go up and meet him, and see what you think." And she went up and met Alan, and she came back and said, "He's perfect. He's wonderful. The funds can go through the Jewish Museum. But we want you involved, Alice, because you know the Washington thing." They wanted a Washington person there -- artist, and somebody, you know. A presence.

So Alan called me and said, "Well, you can be the Vice-Commissioner." [Laughs] And then it was written up in the paper that I was "commissioner of vice." Very funny.

So it worked out perfectly. I took a leave of absence -- to, trying to get over this huff at the Gallery of Modern Art -- and went to become the Vice-Commissioner. And then Alan was determined that we were going to try to get the prize for Rauschenberg. There were no tricks. Everybody thought that my husband was involved, the CIA. [Emile] deAntonio thought that I had practically slept my way through. I mean, it was crazy. And Alan and I had [just] so much money to refurbish the Consulate -- which had not been used, right next to Peggy's [Guggenheim] -- and we had the Pavilion, and then the thing came, who's going to be in the Pavilion, and who's going to be at the Consulate? See, we had other artists, other than Noland, Louis, Bob, and Jasper.

INTERVIEWER: Who made those decisions? Did you?

ALICE DENNEY: More or less. Yeah, well, yeah. It was Alan and myself. And the second stringers didn't care where they were, nor did Bob and Jasper. They didn't care. So it was Morris [Louis] and Ken [Noland] in the Pavilion. Ha, ha. Then, as we got closer ... and we had to get Sam Hunter over, to be a jury person. We didn't have an American on the jury, and there was a silly moment that Alan thought *I* could be on the jury. You know, we were just clamoring for anything that was easy. Then Sam came over, and then he said, "You know, Bob's going to get the prize, but he's illegal. He's not in the Pavilion. He's at the Consulate."

So you know the story. I had to get the launch and go up the canal, and have this temporary, corrugated plastic thing put over. I got a young architect to do it. Actually, he was the nephew of my interpreter. And then we set up the thing for Bob, and we took the paintings up there. And of course, that was a scandal --

INTERVIEWER: because all those paintings weren't qualified. He had to be on a particular -- in the Pavilion.

ALICE DENNEY: -- in the Pavilion. So overnight we had this skittish thing going.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you get the boat? A gondola?

ALICE DENNEY: No, no. I got the launch, from Ethel Kennedy.

INTERVIEWER: Ethel was there?

ALICE DENNEY: Ethel was there. Her jewels were stolen. [Laughs] They thought maybe we had taken her jewels, too! I mean, it was wild. [Laughs]

And see, we were getting all these calls -- because we were in what was, once upon a time, the Consulate.

INTERVIEWER: I'm interested that you and Alan thought that Bob would be able to win the Prize.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, see, Bob had had a show at Whitechapel. The Europeans knew him. His work was very elegantly European, you know what I mean? Whereas Ken and Morris were so austere. They didn't take to that. And the night before, Ken Noland, of course was -- we were all partying -- and Andre Emmerich and everybody thought, "Oh, Ken is certainly --" See, Morris was already dead, and they wanted to give it to a living -- so we thought Ken -- or *they* thought that Ken had a pretty good chance. And..., but Bob got it.

INTERVIEWER: And they wanted to give it to an American, you think.

ALICE DENNEY: I think so. Definitely. I think so. And there was a lot of ... As you probably read in that book of John Cage [by Kenneth Silverman], I think, about -- see, I brought Merce [Cunningham] --he was on his way to the big trip -- and put him into La Fenice Theatre. By the way, I've got those posters that I had made in Venice -- the Cunningham Company, with Carolyn Brown. They're beautiful, on that wonderful paper.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

ALICE DENNEY: Anyway. And at that time, if you read the Cage book, Merce and the dance company got very jealous of Bob at that point. That's where there was a rift. Because everybody loved Bob. He was all over the place; he was on TV; he was surrounded by people.

INTERVIEWER: I've never been to the Venice Biennale. I'm curious to know how they announce the winner.

ALICE DENNEY: They announce it. I have a picture of Bob, and myself, and Alan. Bob was all dressed up in sort of a light tan, with these little squares...-- a very corny suit [laughs] -- and I have a black sheath with pearls, and Alan of course looked quite -- he said to the two of us, he said, "Now you two have got to behave until this is over, when we'll all go out and have lunch," you know, with Leo and everybody. The Ambassador gets up and accepts some of it, then the head of the Biennale announces it. Bob had to go and get it.

INTERVIEWER: He must have been thrilled.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, I think he was! He was the star of the Biennale, in every way. I mean, you know the story that the guys - the artists - took him and walked him around the

Square. And he was also, he did "Summerspace," his piece for Merce, the background, the costumes. And, of course, it was announced, "These costumes are by Bob Rauschenberg," and he got up. So he was known. His name was around.

INTERVIEWER: Smart marketing on your part.

ALICE DENNEY: Well. Hmmn. We tried. He deserved it. He deserved it. Looking back -- looking back -- look what he's done. I mean, Bob's a great inspiration. In his absolute crazy, wonderful way, in every detail, he is a great person.

INTERVIEWER: I hadn't realized that Ileana and Leo were both --

ALICE DENNEY: They were both there, and so was Toiny.

INTERVIEWER: Because Ileana had done some shows with Bob in Paris.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, they are inseparable. Oh, no, no. They're inseparable.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, they had a very special bond, it seems.

ALICE DENNEY: Definitely. Well, you saw that little thing she did. You know, of works that he gave her. ...

INTERVIEWER: Alan Solomon wrote a beautiful essay in your Popular Festival catalogue.

ALICE DENNEY: Alan. Do you know -- I have the original manuscript. When I met Alan at the Jewish Museum, I went up to talk to him to do this -- because somebody recommended him -- and it didn't get done. I said, "Alan, you've got to do this, quick." He said, "I'm going to Florida, and I promise, I'll take the yellow pad, and I'll get it done." He came back with the yellow pad, with suntan lotion on it - I have the original -and I didn't have to change a thing. It just rolled. And then Eleanor Ward used it, a couple of magazines used it, and that was Alan's -- in a funny way, I like to say -- it was the beginning of his -- not his career. He had a very rough time at the Jewish Museum. Very rough. I won't go into it. But he did a beautiful Rauschenberg show. He did the Jasper show. He did a Noland show. But they, except for Vera List, the trustees weren't good to him.

INTERVIEWER: He was a taste-maker, in the same way, really, that -- when you all put up the several candidates for the Venice Biennale -- that was a taste-making event in terms of American art. Don't you think?

ALICE DENNEY: Well, I think, it's funny how -- to us, it was just so natural. We didn't argue about it at all. Alan and I really decided. It wasn't Leo, or Ivan Karp. I mean it. As a matter of fact, you would think that I would have really pushed Ken and Morris, because they were my children, from way back. But I could see this whole new thing coming in, and I loved the Popular Image show. That was one, fun show, with Dine, and the Happening -- Oldenburg. It was --

INTERVIEWER: -- groundbreaking.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, I thought so. And it was packed. That put the Gallery of Modern Art -- well, you know the Wesselmann story.

INTERVIEWER: No.

ALICE DENNEY: The Board of Trustees made me take the "All American Nude" of Wesselmann out of the show, with Jack Kennedy, looking at the "All American Nude." ... I almost lost the show. The artists were going to pull out.

INTERVIEWER: Plus ça change....So when you came back from your trip, and back to Washington, it didn't take very long for you to think about the NOW Festival --

ALICE DENNEY: Well, see, I took a leave of absence. Then I skirted -- I had this little Foundation, the Private Arts Foundation ...

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

ALICE DENNEY: -- a 501(c)3. I had that before the [Arts] Endowment. That's how I was able to do all these funny things. And then I thought, "I've got to do something," and I was so into Pop Art, and the dancers, and Cage, and all that -- "A Festival. That's what I'll do." That's how the NOW Festival -- and that was a very successful.... That was all under my Private Arts Foundation. It wasn't the Gallery of Modern Art.

INTERVIEWER: So you decided, "I'll go get some of those great folks who I worked with before."?

ALICE DENNEY: Right. Right. I went to New York. Bob and the gang -- we had meetings with Whitman and everything, and the dancers -- Trish, [Trisha Brown] and Yvonne Rainer -- well, you know the whole group. Then we had this wonderful week of the NOW Festival. And it was superb. At the end of it, we had the NOW Ball, at the turn-of-the-century -- Adams Mill -- and there was Ginsberg, dancing with Rauschenberg, and that funny -- Taylor Meade. Leo came down with Toiny. Everybody was [staying] in the attic. Alex and Debby Hay. It was a week of ... Then I had a symposium -- which is terrific. John Cage, at the Pan-American Union? Can you imagine doing that today? His concert there was superb, with David Tudor, in these gold chairs, crystal chandeliers, at the Pan-American Union. Because Rafael Squirru was director at the time, and Rafael *loved* everything I was doing. I said, "Could we have the Pan-American Union?" and he said, "Of course."³

Now that was unheard of. And then we did the films. We did *Flicker*. Remember that film? [Does sound FX] And the very funny little films. Everybody thought they were going to see a lot of porn, but they weren't. They were very weird; very minimal.

³ Alice Denney (on 3.1.11) said that George Richer from the US Army Band told John Cage and David Tudor that whatever instruments he needed, the US Army Band would provide.

INTERVIEWER: Bob did "Canoe." You projected "Canoe." I think that was one of his pieces?

ALICE DENNEY: Yes. And we did Oldenburg hanging a painting -- just simple -- at Janus Theatres. Do you remember -- you weren't here then.

INTERVIEWER: I wasn't here.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, I'll tell you, we sold out. I mean literally. I got my old Jefferson Place Gallery space back, my old landlord gave it to me, and I had a couple of good, wonderful volunteers there. And I made this huge thing of every minute, what we were going to do for the Festival.

You know, Yvonne Rainer -- I was reading about something that Bob Morris did throwing sticks out, and you know, her piece at the roller-skating rink was throwing sticks. And she had mirrors around, and you thought those sticks were going to hit those mirrors, but they didn't. And that she got from Bob Morris. You know, she went with Bob.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

ALICE DENNEY: Yes, they were --

INTERVIEWER: -- an item.

ALICE DENNEY: Yes.

So I was reading this book -- I forget which one -- and that's where she got the idea. And Trish, of course, in her great way, she had this little Volkswagen, going around, and who was supposed to ... Not Fahlstrom but somebody like that, was supposed to drive it, and my husband had to do it -- this little car, which Trish used. And then it almost went up the side of the wall of the roller-skating rink.

INTERVIEWER: And what was she doing?

ALICE DENNEY: Who? (Trish) She was doing her thing somewhere. Paxton had a big, inflatable blowup, and Bob did the Linoleum. And do you know how that came about?

INTERVIEWER: No. Tell me.

ALICE DENNEY: We went to the Phillips Gallery. He had no idea what he was going to do. He opened the Festival with the roller-skating rink. We went to the Phillips, and he saw Van Buren's ... the woman sitting in the chair. [Thomas Eakins "Portrait of Amelia van Buren"].



He looked at that, and he said, "That's where it's going to start." And I said, "Well, what in the world -- ?" "Find me a chair, an old, old chair." We went to the Goodwill. A chair. And then he said, "I need a dress that's --" I had my grandmother's wedding dress up in the attic. I got that -- which Simone Forti wore. Remember? Sitting -- ? And then from there, he went on to the images of the flag, and Debbie Hay sat here [at Alice Denney's dining room table], sewing the flag -- I mean, a *big* flag. You know, that was... And then the chickens. He said, "I want white chickens." I said, "Bob, that's impossible." A friend of mine, who wanted to help -- she wanted to be part of it -- I said, "M.D.[Marian Dare], you just go out and find some chickens." Well, she knew somebody out on some Maryland farm, and Noche Crist, who made hand-blocked the covers for the program, went with Wendy, to get the chickens, and the chickens pooped all the way home.

We had chickens in the garage. And then Alex -- no, Steve, got in the cage -- and then they used, Bob, -- little, moving -- those little moving sculptures. They were like little skates.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. So they could move around...

ALICE DENNEY: Bob Breer. Yes. And then my son --

INTERVIEWER: Who made the wire cage?

ALICE DENNEY: That was made out here. Out here in my garage, I have a picture of Bob sitting there with ... -- my daughter took the photo. She was twelve -- sitting there with the little things, roller-skating wheels, which I often use to move furniture. [Laughs] I think it's falling apart, but -- and that was all out there, in the garage, made. They were here for two weeks.

INTERVIEWER: Putting it all together.

ALICE DENNEY: Putting it all together, just doing their thing.

INTERVIEWER: There wasn't really an opportunity to practice "Linoleum," before the show, was there?

ALICE DENNEY: Not that I know of, no. And we didn't have any equipment. We had no camera. We had no video. We had no sound -- great stuff. When I talked about the NOW Festival, I said that this was the high-tech, and it shows a little thing this big, in the middle of the roller-skating rink. I mean, come on, Karen. We had ... You know something? There was no equipment, no fancy stuff, and it was real art.

So when these guys come at me with these projects, hundreds of pages of what they need, I say, "Forget it. Take it to the Smithsonian. I'm finished."

INTERVIEWER: There were some suits, too. I saw some people walking around in suits?

ALICE DENNEY: No, no. Those were see-through suits. I have Bob's. Yes. And Debbie Hay was in a see-through suit, with Bob Rauschenberg. Is that what you're talking about?

INTERVIEWER: When I see photographs of "Linoleum," I have seen an individual - I don't know who it is-, and it looked almost as if they were in a bee-keeping suit.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, yes. No, but that was a see-through plastic suit. It was pants, and the top. And both he and Debbie Hay wore those.

INTERVIEWER: Wonderful. .

ALICE DENNEY: "Linoleum" was quite beautiful. The darn thing -- Andy you know, people ...the whole thing was sold out, and the tickets were what, ten dollars. And if you'd go to the NOW Ball, it was ten dollars. Then I was trying -- the "Hangmen," this band? And I thought they were going to be stars. They were going to be the future Beatles of Washington. And I helped those "Hangmen." Then a friend of mine gave a party, a rehearsal party, and I have that little film. And I have the "Hangmen." But I was so sure these guys were going to make it big. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: But they had to compete with Andy Warhol, and his *band*, right?

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, Andy ruined the Bob Whitman piece. "Prune Flat." Because they took out the extension cords. Don't forget, we didn't have equipment, so everything was depending on these extension cords. And the Velvet Underground came in -- Niko and the gang -- and so Bob, bless his heart, he was pretty nice about it -- Whitman. It ruined his piece. "Prune Flat." In fact, it was just a little bit of here and there.

INTERVIEWER: That's unfortunate.

ALICE DENNEY: Yes, it was unfortunate. I don't think it was Andy -- I don't think he wanted to do it. But Paul Morrissey -- you know, everybody was on a high of ... Then I have a list of what they needed -- mostly sweat suits. They got \$200 for their event. Every artist was

paid \$200. Paul Morrissey called me and said, "We're not coming unless you can pay for four tires for the car." I said, "Wait, that isn't in the contract." He said, "We need four new tires," and I've got that on the list -- "Paid to Andy Warhol."

INTERVIEWER: So everybody said to you -- "I need chickens," "I need extension cords --"

ALICE DENNEY: Right.

INTERVIEWER: -- and you collected your friends and said --

ALICE DENNEY: It was strictly a volunteer operation, with loads of publicity. I mean, we had more press. You know. And it was the talk of the town. As corny as it is, it was the talk of the town. I mean that. And the artists were all... It was a jumble of great fun, and some beautiful pieces came out of that.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely. And they seem to have reprised them several times thereafter --

ALICE DENNEY: I know.

INTERVIEWER: -- in other Happenings.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, you know here -- it's kind of died down -- but for a long time, and even when the "Art Table" did this thing -- you know I'm getting this award -- and it's all due to the NOW Festival and all those funny things.

INTERVIEWER: It opened up a lot of doors here.

ALICE DENNEY: It did. And getting back to why we're doing this -- Rauschenberg was, without a doubt, the inspiration. He certainly inspired me. He gave me a lot of courage, a lot of courage -- and I mean this in all humility. You know, it was an artist like that who really got me going, thinking that some of my ideas were not off the wall.

INTERVIEWER: When I spoke with Susan Weil recently, she was talking about the impact of Black Mountain College, and she said that one of the things that came out of it was an understanding that art could be multi-dimensional, such that what you ended up doing was creating a big soufflé of artists, and engineers, and dancers, and scientists. I thought it was a beautiful image for what happened, then, another ten or fifteen years later.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, no. Black Mountain was very -- that's where Merce and everybody did their first event -- if you read the John Cage book. Then I brought Merce here, you know, for the first time.

INTERVIEWER: When?

ALICE DENNEY: Seventy.

INTERVIEWER: Really....

ALICE DENNEY: Lisner Auditorium.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, ho, ho, I do. Alan Solomon died that weekend that I brought -- and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know whether to dedicate the program -- I paid the help at Lisner Auditorium more than I paid Merce, at that time. Yep.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder what pieces he performed.

ALICE DENNEY: At that time, "Summerspace," and he did Andy Warhol's "Pillows," because I had to go out and find somebody to help me with the helium. The other one -- I don't know. I've got the program.

INTERVIEWER: Because he and Bob, by that time, were not friendly.

ALICE DENNEY: Bob did not come down for it. Bob came down for the last big thing that Merce did here, next to the last. It was at the Kennedy Center.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Interscape (?)

ALICE DENNEY: Well, Carolyn Brown had to teach the dancers how to do it. She was no longer in the company.

Have you read her book? She has a great book.

INTERVIEWER: No, I haven't. I want to.

ALICE DENNEY: It's very good. You should read that book. It's quite excellent.

INTERVIEWER: I want to talk to her, also.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, yes. Oh, my gosh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: ...The fear of skating, or being en pointe, in the "America on Wheels," with these two mad men [laughs] in parachutes!

ALICE DENNEY: Her book is great. You really should read it.

INTERVIEWER: You decided, after the NOW Festival, not to do any further Festivals in Washington?

ALICE DENNEY: Yes. I was working on something the other day, and everything was going wrong, and one of my friends said, "Just call it a Festival. That's what you usually do."
[Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: But I imagine you kept up with Bob. It's hard not to.

ALICE DENNEY: Oh, always. Always. Always. I didn't see him -- he was here -- well, I saw him every time he was at the National Gallery, during "ROCI," and all that stuff. And then... When did I last see him? I saw him one more time in Captiva. No, wait. He was here -- was this just after [Don] put him on the plane to go to rehab? Saff?

INTERVIEWER: I don't know. And he came back to Washington? He was here, I remember, because that's when I first met him. But it was maybe in '85?

ALICE DENNEY: But why was he here? He was here for something. Was it the "Vogel?"

INTERVIEWER: I know he lobbied in Congress. That was interesting to me.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, I went up to the Hill to lobby with a group, but I was still at the WPA. It was just before '80. That was in '70 -- I went up there -- John Brademas --

INTERVIEWER: Senator Javits?

ALICE DENNEY: No. Sid Yates and Brademas were my buddies. Javits wasn't. I knew Marion, but I didn't know the Senator very well. Marion was always kind of -- you know -- she was a star, and I wasn't too interested --

INTERVIEWER: -- in all of that. In that world.

ALICE DENNEY: No.

INTERVIEWER: Captiva -- I wanted to ask about Captiva. Did you follow Bob's work in New York, and then the work that he did in Captiva?

ALICE DENNEY: Yes. Well, when we were down there -- you know, he had that huge print thing, and all these people working. I didn't follow it, but I knew what he was doing.

INTERVIEWER: Such a gracious man.

ALICE DENNEY: He was a friend forever. I didn't take advantage of him when he became -- it's funny. Once they're up there -- okay. They're on their way.

INTERVIEWER: Exactly.

ALICE DENNEY: It's not the fun. And then you have that feeling that you're only seeing them because they're -- Oldenburg the same way. He stayed here for two weeks, he and Patty, his first wife, when he was working on the Happening.

INTERVIEWER: You have a well-used basement, I think.

ALICE DENNEY: Do you know, I put -- you should see the list. My daughter put it together for me. And since she was here all those..., being pushed out of her beds, and so forth, it reads like the art world of the '60s: Clem Greenberg; Pontus Hultén; artists; Leo Castelli and Toiny. I'm not kidding. John Cage, for a week, with Mimi Johnson, who's head of The Music Group; Bob Ashley, the musician; Harold Rosenberg; Clem Greenberg. They all -- well, see -- oh, Rothko and Kline, and Betsy Zaugbaum -- attic and basement. Pretty terrible, isn't it.

INTERVIEWER: You're the kindred soul.

ALICE DENNEY: I'm just telling you this because it's so fun.

INTERVIEWER: It's fun.

ALICE DENNEY: I read in *Vanity Fair* that the Kennedy administration treated the artists with great -- I said, "They treated them great down in my basement, and in the attic." [Laughs] It's true, Karen. I couldn't make this up.

INTERVIEWER: No, you definitely can't. And I appreciate what you say about being so interested in all of these talented people when they were younger, and didn't know what they were going to become.

ALICE DENNEY: They had no idea. Oh, they had no idea.

INTERVIEWER: That's the fun of it.

ALICE DENNEY: It is. And that's why we were all the same.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Sure.

I like knowing about Bob as your co-conspirator, as it were, about working in that larger environment, because I'm really struck by his interest in collaboration, and his interest in having --- not a lot of people, but he was so gregarious. He liked people.

ALICE DENNEY: He had to have people around him. I can't imagine Bob sitting in a corner. I can't imagine him reading a book. I know he always had the boob-tube going -- you know, the television -- but his life was people. Everything. Yes. I never knew him to be alone. Ever. Did you?

INTERVIEWER: No.

ALICE DENNEY: We spent a lot of time -- I mean, he was here for the first Festival, then in between, and then for the NOW, definitely he was here for the NOW. Oh, my gosh. And he was behind it all. I never got any money from Bob. For a while he would call me about -- I remember when Yvonne needed money, and I don't know -- I happened to be in New York at the time, and he said, "I'm going to put you on a Board." Well, I was on that Board for about forty-eight hours. [Laughs] And he sent Yvonne \$500, when she was, and.... he and Billy Klüver were very funny together.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, tell me.

ALICE DENNEY: Well, "EAT" and all that, and the two of them were very strong-willed characters. And Billy thought it was *his* idea, and Bob thought it was *his* idea. It was the usual -- "Well, that was *my* idea, Billy." "No, no, that was *my* idea." So the two of them together. And they were here together during the NOW Festival.

INTERVIEWER: Was Billy helpful to you?

ALICE DENNEY: Yes, he was. He really was. A difficult guy. Bob was never difficult with me. I never had a cross.... But with Billy, there were a lot of problems. I've got letters from Billy -- "Don't forget, it was my idea to do the record. Don't forget --" this and that. Well, I don't care. The record idea just sort of came to both of us, but he was the one who wrote the contract. So that if that record was going to be biggest thing in the world, the proceeds would go -- [Laughs] Actually, it was published under the auspices of the Gallery of Modern Art. So it wasn't a... But Billy wanted to be in there. Okay, Billy.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

ALICE DENNEY: I know what happened. Unless my brain goes -- I know what happened. And that's, to me the inner knowledge -- I know exactly what happened. That's why I don't want to write a book or *anything*. I'm a failure at that. Somebody made me this typewriter with this thing in it that's called "Writer's Block," and it's a work of art. I just can't do it.

INTERVIEWER: You don't need to.

ALICE DENNEY: But I know what happened, and that's the most important thing.

INTERVIEWER: So for somebody -- I'm going to wrap us up with this question -- for somebody fifty years from now, who didn't have the pleasure of meeting Bob Rauschenberg, how would you define that spirit of his?

ALICE DENNEY: There was no end to his curiosity, and to his love of life. And he tried to, in his work, create that absolute collage of everything. Everything is possible, anything is possible. Does that make sense?

INTERVIEWER: Totally. Thank you.

ALICE DENNEY: We've got a lot of stuff there. You've got to -- we've got to wipe that out.

INTERVIEWER: I don't think it talks about Bob. Do you have more things you wanted to say?

ALICE DENNEY: No.

[End of Interview]

For research purposes only. Do not duplicate or reproduce without permission.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation