

Interview with FRANK GEHRY

ARCHITECT

Conducted by Karen Thomas, Interviewer

July 21, 2011

Marina del Rey, California

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

KAREN THOMAS: What I wanted to first ask you was when you first encountered Rauschenberg, because I think you encountered his work before you met Bob?

FRANK GEHRY: Yes. Yes, I did. I started practicing on my own in 1962, and I'd grown up in an office where there was a Viennese kind of perfection of details. So that's how I was trained. Then when I started my own office, nobody could afford that. None of my clients could afford that. So then I had to look beyond there, and a lot of the artists were making art with *junk*. I loved the look of buildings under construction -- the wood framing -- and I think I saw the *Combines*. When were the *Combines*?

THOMAS: The *Combines* were in the 1950s, from '52 to '62.

GEHRY: So right about then I would have become aware of him.

THOMAS: Would you have been here in Los Angeles, then? There was a woman called Virginia Dwan -- (FG: Yes, I know her.) -- who had a gallery, and I think she had a *Combine* show. I was wondering if maybe you had seen them there.

GEHRY: For sure. And I was hanging out with the artists here at that time -- Moses, Larry Bell, Billy Bengston, and all those guys. I also got to know the people at Gemini -- Grinstein and Ken Tyler at that time.

THOMAS: That was early on then, just when they started. This was '66, when they started Gemini, I think.

GEHRY: I started my practice in '62. I saw Jasper. I kind of knew Jasper through [John] Altoon. John Altoon and Jasper were friends, so when Jasper would come to town, we'd meet, and we'd have dinner. John Altoon and Babs -- who's now Babs Thompson and lives in London -- but up until John died she worked for me, she was my assistant. I got to know David Whitney during that period. Not well. I used to want to meet Philip Johnson but they wouldn't let me. (KT: Because?) They said, "When he's ready to meet you, you'll find out." And that's how it happened, too.

THOMAS: Was that like the phone call from --?

GEHRY: Well, it came through somebody, through somebody, through somebody. I collapse dates, so if I say things -- I don't know accurate my dating is, but -- 1966-'67, I went through a divorce. I was living alone, and I used to hang out with the actor, Ben Gazzara. His wife, Janice Rule, was a dancer with the RKO Rockettes. She became a pretty good actress, but she was always a dancer. Vivian Kauffman, Craig's ex-wife, was a close friend of mine -- she still is -- and through Craig -- I don't know how -- she was close to Rauschenberg. He wanted to meet Ben Gazzara; they knew I knew him, so I arranged a dinner at Bennie's house, and Janice fell in love with Bob because he was a dancer; they began drinking, and dancing, and they became friends. That was in the '70s. I screwed up the time.

THOMAS: Do you recall what the first impression was of Bob when you met him?

GEHRY: It was an explosion of words, and energy, and embracing ideas. I think I also worked with him on Art and Technology. Did he do that with Maurice Tuchman?

THOMAS: Did you work on that? (FG: Yes, with --) On *Mud Muse*?

GEHRY: I didn't work on his, but I was with [Robert] Irwin and the group, yes, that Tuchman set up.

THOMAS: I've been trying to find people who were involved in that.

GEHRY: So what year was that?

THOMAS: I think it would be early '70s. I can actually tell you, because I made myself a cheat sheet. Bob was so prolific. *Mud Muse* was '68 through '71.

GEHRY: Well, that's when I knew him.

THOMAS: So that's when you first met him.

GEHRY: I think I already knew him. And then we became closer friends during the dancing with Gazzara and stuff like that. Then I would go to New York, and he'd invite me to come to Lafayette, and he'd have a bottle of Jack Daniels, and we'd stand there as he was working until 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. (KT: Really.) Yes. I remember a few times anyway, maybe more than five. But I don't know.

THOMAS: He enjoyed having people around while he was [working.]...

GEHRY: I guess so. He seemed to like me. He seemed to be intrigued with what I was about, and very friendly, very bracing.

THOMAS: I had read somewhere that you said that you enjoyed being around artists more than you enjoyed being around architects, and I thought, "Well, of course, they're going to get along,

because Bob always said he much more enjoyed being around dancers than he did being around other painters."

GEHRY: I remember we talked a lot about a lot of things. I can't remember what. But he was all over the place. And his infectious laugh -- embracing but edgy. You were never kind of sure where you stood.

It was always funny. Over time, I came down on the side of you were okay. That was his way of being a friend, I think, at the time. But it took a while for me to understand -- because he would joke about -- he would say things that would make you wonder, do I like that guy?

THOMAS: Double-edged sword kinds of things?

GEHRY: A lot of that.

THOMAS: I was watching a video of an interview with Bob and two other people, and I saw another side of Bob that I hadn't really seen where he wasn't so nice to one of these people. He was sort of dismissive. And I thought, "That's interesting. I'd not seen that side of him." Is that what you mean? Or just fickle?

GEHRY: A little bit. It wasn't painful; it was just like you were on edge. Does he want me to leave? Or what? I was totally enthralled, because I loved the *Combines* I loved what he was doing, and I loved the way his mind worked. I couldn't get enough of it, because it was like Proust, *Don Quixote*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, all at once -- and those are my three favorites. So I loved being with him and talking to him. He didn't talk about my work very much, because there wasn't much to talk about.

THOMAS: Did you talk with him about Bilbao?

GEHRY: Well, that's a long story. I can tell you the story.

So finally, I did a Gemini remodel, and I built the artist's -- there's a little alley between the old Gemini and the wood thing that goes up, and under that wood thing I had an artist's studio. I tilted it. I can show you why. It made sense. Here's the alley. [Sound of pencil on paper -- drawing] Here's the thing. Here's the stairway going up. And here's the studio. So you could do this, so you walk out. But if you do this, it opened it up more. So we proposed it like that, in the model, and he saw it. Rosamund Felsen was there, and he started screaming about it. He was very angry. After that little episode -- we turned it around and built it the way he wanted it. I had a logic system to it of why I did it, which I never got to explain to him. He just went over the top. From then on for the next maybe six, seven, eight years -- ten years, maybe -- he wouldn't talk to me. He'd see me coming at a party or something, and he'd go like this. [Raises his arms and crosses fingers into a "don't come near me" X.] It was very disconcerting, from somebody I adored, right? He would always say, "I don't like architects." I don't know what was going on.

I don't think it was mean, I think it was just -- he must have thought that this was some kind of betrayal, some kind of ego-trip for me, that I was getting in the way of the artists. He read me differently, and didn't take time to come over and ask me. So it was quite a period, some years hence. I would see him at things, and he would [makes fingers into an X]. It was awful for me. Then Bilbao happened, and the day of the opening -- or maybe a few days beforehand -- something like that -- there was a press thing that I had to go to, that I had to be there for. So I came into the big atrium [draws], and there was this guy in a blue jacket -- that's what he was wearing, standing there --, and I saw him, and I thought, "Wait a minute. This is *my* day. I don't want to run into a buzz saw." I didn't want to get near him. So I started to go this way. Turns out, he was looking for me, so he caught me, he called me over, and he put his arms around me, kissed me on the lips, and he said, "This is great. I love it."

THOMAS: Go figure.

GEHRY: I think he'd been there and saw the "Furlong" piece in the big gallery. He was so happy about it, because he said it was the first time --

THOMAS: -- he'd been able to put that piece up.

GEHRY: -- put it up. He was very friendly to me. From then on -- this is '99, and Bilbao was '97, so it was two years later -- the Grinstein's had a birthday party. There were a lot of us who had birthdays the same day -- Peter Alexander's is around there --

THOMAS: Are you all Leos?

GEHRY: No, I'm a Pisces. There was a birthday party for about six of us, and it was at the Grinstein's. It was a big party. They invited everybody in the goddamned world. Everybody was there. Claes Oldenburg. Everybody. And in walks Bob, with a wrapped -- that thing [referring to picture] -- which is big, wrapped in craft paper, and he gives it to me. "Happy Birthday."

THOMAS: I never heard a story like this before.

GEHRY: You know who might know more about it is Sidney, and "Rosebud." Rosamund. I call her "Rosebud."

THOMAS: I'm going to see her on Sunday.

GEHRY: Ask her. She might have left before then. So this one might just be a Sidney one.

THOMAS: When you did your cardboard furniture it was about the same time Bob did his *Cardbirds*.

GEHRY: I know. He saw me working on the cardboard, and the dates suggest that he was moved to start playing with it again. He'd played with it before. It wasn't that I invented the

cardboard for him but I was doing things that interested him. I remember he talked to me about it. And Frank Stella picked up with it. Frank Stella also did the Polish series.

THOMAS: With the cardboard.

GEHRY: Yes. There are cardboard walls in Sidney's office that Bob made. Just pieces of cardboard. He did that kind of stuff. So that was the first inkling I had that I'd connected with him a little bit. There was something else I wanted to --[Shows pictures of Rauschenberg and Gehry's wife.] That was in Japan.

THOMAS: What were you doing in Japan?

GEHRY: Well, he got the Premium Imperiale, and I had gotten it before. I got it in '92, he got it a few years later. This was the last one, when he was already paralyzed. That's my wife. He *loved* my wife – Berthe and he... She's Panamanian, and she has the kind of sense of humor that he went crazy [for]. You can see it. He didn't pay any attention to anybody else that night.

THOMAS: What did she like about him?

GEHRY: His free spirit. She's not here today, but you can talk to her about him.

THOMAS: After his stroke he seemed to move along with it pretty well.

GEHRY: Well, that night [that picture of Bob and Berthe was taken] when the show opened at MOCA.

I didn't like the show. I didn't like the installation of it.

THOMAS: Did you see the one, by any chance, at the Met?

GEHRY: Yes. That was ten times better.

THOMAS: I spent some time this morning talking to the man who curated that show, Paul Schimmel.

GEHRY: He did that at the Met, too.

THOMAS: He didn't do the installation at the Met.

GEHRY: He did it in L.A.? (KT: He did it here, yes.) The space wasn't great for it, wasn't his fault, anyway...

THOMAS: Yes. He was saying that he didn't think Bob liked having the show.

GEHRY: Well, you get annoyed with the fuss about it, especially such a long – (KT: such a long time ago.) You would say, "Making shows about your old work. Why are they still -- look what

I'm doing now," kind of attitude. I think most of us have that knee-jerk thing. I get it, too. But Bob was interested in such a wide range of topics that you could never exhaust anything. I think if he started talking about quantum physics, he probably could get with it. He'd figure a way to get it, to figure it out, to talk about it, or to have fun with it, in whatever he would do.

The last time I saw him was in New York. This was not the last..." I went to Lafayette, and he had the turtle walking around -- (KT: ROCI) -- on the wood floor. I was with Krens, and we were just starting on Abu [Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Museum]. We started talking about Abu. I had proposed to Krens that we ask Bob to do a chapel, like one in Italy --

THOMAS: I know what you're talking about, and I don't know how to say the name.

GEHRY: It's got blue paintings -- it's a whole chapel. Anyway. I'd been there, and I remember looking at it and thinking, "Wouldn't it be great if a contemporary artist took a shot at this," and thought that Bob was the logical guy. So I brought it up with Krens, everybody liked the idea, and we talked to Bob and he liked the idea. So we were talking about it, and my assistant, Megan, was there. She'd never met Bob, but loved.. She's a 35-year-old architect. She had drawings of his. She's a total Rauschenberg freak.

So she was with me, she met him, and it was one of the most important days of her life. Then he died shortly... We met with his boyfriend, what's his name? (KT: Darryl.) He was in spirits. I'll never forget this clunky sound, as ROCI went all over the place, while we were talking.

THOMAS: Did he ever cook for you?

GEHRY: I don't think so.

THOMAS: I thought Tom Krens did a really fantastic job with that huge retrospective that they did at the Gugg. I think if they'd had another building, Bob would have liked to have had that filled with his work, too.

GEHRY: Well, Tom talked about getting the Skerritt Building in New York. It was for sale and he was going to buy it, and he was going to put Bob's archive in there, and my archive and he asked Bob would it be okay to have mine with him, and he said yes. He agreed to it. So for a while I thought we were going to do it, but Tom couldn't pull it off.

THOMAS: Is the Skerritt Building downtown? Yes. That would have been brilliant.

GEHRY: So I've got crates that would fill that whole room out there, with all these models. I'll take you out and show you. But there's a lot of Rauschenberg out there -- if you think about it from that point of view.

THOMAS: Yes. So your takeaway from those first *Combines* was what in my family we called the "honesty of construction?"

GEHRY: Well, no it was about precious/non-precious. I already had a predisposition to non-precious. I didn't like it. But clients all wanted this refined plan. But I found out that the clients I got, for starters, didn't have that kind of money. But they still wanted stuff to be a certain way. But then I was able to bridge that, like with my own house, where it's kind of raw, so if you see water stains are on the wall, or the wood -- people like Arthur Drexler, who came to the house for dinner one night, when the house was finished -- I wasn't there. I was somewhere else. But my wife hosted a dinner with some of the local art people for him and they wanted our house. He called Philip Johnson after that, and he said, "Well, I saw a water stain on the wood. I didn't know if that was on purpose, or was that intentional or accidental?" I remember just howling with laughter, because that was the point. Drexel never did get what I was doing, and I think the Museum of Modern Art guys still don't.

THOMAS: They never got what Bob was doing, either.

GEHRY: So I've been in his camp for many years. Even now. I love it. I'm happy. He was for me the greatest in my lifetime.

THOMAS: Those young guys who were in Los Angeles and I know, in your world, the young artists, do you think they've had a big takeaway from Bob?

GEHRY: Well, I think they certainly liked him, and revered him and respected him, and all those things. I think most [unclear]. I don't know if they would talk about it that way. Some of them would.

THOMAS: On Monday, I'm going to go talk with Laddie Dill, and then Chuck Arnoldi. Those are two people that I know have -- I don't know if it's a social connection or if it's a—

GEHRY: Well, Bob liked them. He liked them. He was always supportive of them, I remember. They're really close friends of mine, so I was close to all of that. I'd always thought there was a little bit of that-- they were really cute as the Dickens. [Laughter]

THOMAS: Well, there is that.

GEHRY: That was in the pie for him. But he did support them, when nobody else was. Not a lot of people. I think he was good at that. He could "suss" out when somebody was struggling, and he would just put a laser on -- he knew he had the power to do that.

THOMAS: Yes, that's true.

GEHRY: There was a generosity I always felt.

THOMAS: That generosity -- it just seems to show up in a lot of places.

GEHRY: Especially at my seventh-eighth birthday. It was totally unexpected -- given the history, given having gone through all that time, and he arrives with this --

THOMAS: Well, that's a very nice "I'm awfully sorry."

[Side conversation]

GEHRY: I tried to work with [Trisha Brown] once. It was hilarious. At BAM, she asked me to do a set for her dance. So -- here's how I work. I find out what the people do, what they want, and discover a problem, let's meet with them. We work, and try things, and interact. I could never get her on the phone. She never called back. Then a week before the performance, she calls me and says, "I hope you're ready." [Laughter] Then I realized that that's how Bob, and Merce, and those guys worked. But they were much closer.

THOMAS: Yes. They were like best friends with each other's minds.

GEHRY: They knew each other, and they could -- Merce just loved to walk into a rehearsal, give me the thing, and he would play with it. But I couldn't -- I could, if I'd been posed the problem, but I wasn't. I should have known, probably.

So I couldn't do it, and she was angry with me. Then I did *Available Light*, with Lucinda and John Adams, and I told Lucinda about the problem, and I said, "So, can I spend a little bit of time to see what you're up to?" and she danced for me, privately, Lucinda, and it was amazing. I was knocked off my pins. She just said, "Okay, sit over there." She took off, and I was crying, it was so beautiful. "Now make a set for me."

THOMAS: For the last year and a half, I've thought that it would be a really great documentary to make about the collaboration between a visual artist, and a dance artist, and a musician, and just watch the process of how that comes about, like what you were talking about. What a special moment that would be to be able to see.

GEHRY: Well, Merce -- I guess it was two or three years before he died, he asked me to do a set. I turned him down. I turned him down because I couldn't afford to do it. They didn't have any money, and I was not in a position to -- I worked with a lot of people, so when you push my button, it's not just me, and I have to pay people.

THOMAS: It's like a tsunami.

GEHRY: Yes. And I felt so badly that I couldn't do it. But also, he wasn't willing, at that point, to sit and talk with me. It was like the Trisha thing. I felt like, going in, I wouldn't be able to do it justice without something more coherent.

THOMAS: Did you ever spend time with John Cage?

GEHRY: Yes.

THOMAS: What was he like?

GEHRY: Well, they were funny. They laughed -- I mean a lot of them, they probably mimicked it without knowing it, Rauschenberg's laugh, which was so infectious. They all seemed to have a similar kind of Rauschenberg laugh. I had dinner with John. He invited -- I was doing Christophe de Menil's house, and he invited Christophe and Berthe and me for dinner -- Merce was on the road, or something. -- and he made this vegetable thing with -- you know, vegetarian, which they were totally into -- *but* he kept filling my glass with vodka, and his own. So it didn't matter what we were eating. So this wonderful health dinner turned into a drunken brawl. I remember Berthe and I went back to the hotel that night and we ordered hamburgers, we were so freaked out.

John came to my house with Bucky Fuller -- Buckminster Fuller -- and we all had lunch at a Chinese restaurant. They wanted to see my house, so they came by. John was looking for mushrooms.

THOMAS: He did that, apparently. And he knew the ones to eat. Was he fun?

GEHRY: They *all* were fun. Especially, when they were all together. They were more fun when they were together. But Bob was always fun, by himself.

THOMAS: Merce told me that when they were all on the road together, they'd all pile into that Volkswagen bus, and they would play scrabble. John would be driving, he'd look over, and Bob had just done his turn, and he'd say, "But Bob, that's not a word." And Merce said, "Well, but you know, Bob was so convincing of what it could be that they went along that way." I thought that was nice.

I hadn't heard about the laughing in the same way. It *was* an infectious laugh.

GEHRY: Well, Jasper does it too.

THOMAS: He does? The same laugh?

GEHRY: Similar.

THOMAS: So what do you think the next generation ought to know about [Bob]?

GEHRY: Well, they ought to know that he was brilliant. I don't think he went to college, right?

THOMAS: No. Well, he went to Black Mountain College. Book learning wasn't --

GEHRY: He wasn't an academic. But he knew about it all. How did he figure that out?

THOMAS: I don't know. I was going to ask you.

GEHRY: I don't know. [Laughs] That's what I mean. He knew -- when you'd bring up a subject that may have been totally out of left field for him, he could engage it, even without knowing anything about it -- which was interesting. But I think he liked people. He met a lot of people.

He was given access to everyone to meet with, for many years. There was a whole bunch of them he hung out with.

THOMAS: He liked to be around people who made a difference.

GEHRY: Yes. I know. I was flattered that he took me in a few times.

I think I've told you everything.

THOMAS: I was going to say I don't want to fish around and --

GEHRY: I used to see him at events at Art and Technology, the Grinstein's. He always came to the Grinstein's house.

THOMAS: He stayed there, I guess, a lot.

GEHRY: A lot of them did. Then Lafayette Street.

THOMAS: Did you ever go to the Cedar Bar in New York?

GEHRY: Yes. A long time ago. Yes. I saw all of them there one night. (KT: All those artists?) Yes. But I wasn't connected. I used to hang around New York with [John] Chamberlain, and he used to take me to the factory, with Warhol, with Ultra Violet, and "Diva," and I met a lot of those people. And Andy. I loved Andy.

THOMAS: It's fun to imagine all of you guys, in your twenties and early thirties, everybody just doing what they're doing, and --

GEHRY: Well, we're still doing it.

THOMAS: [Laughs] But you know what I mean. You didn't know where you were going to end up.

GEHRY: I'm close to Claes Oldenburg. I saw him the other night in New York. He's one month older than me. We've collaborated together on a building here with binoculars.

THOMAS: So that's nice. When you get to work with other artists. Do you consider yourself an artist? You do, don't you?

GEHRY: Well, in the world we live in today, there are categories. If you say you're one thing then somebody's going to yell at you, especially my old friend Richard Serra, who's an ex-friend I guess, 'cause he doesn't talk to me anymore. He says, "I'm a plumber." He told Charlie Rose, on Charlie Rose. (KT: What!!) So I think that historically, that architects were considered artists, and there are a lot of things we do alike, but -- I call it the moment of truth -- when you get to that moment, and you are starting to make things, whether it has plumbing in it or not, it doesn't really matter. But it's safer to just declare myself an ARCHITECT. Then you don't get

into the discussion. Some people -- you know, the artists that feel that way call me an architect, and the architects that want to get rid of me call me an artist.

THOMAS: I would call you a diplomat and a humanitarian, because of the experience that I had fifteen miles out of Bilbao, when I went to the opening. I didn't have the money to stay where everybody was staying in downtown Bilbao. A friend of mine and I go, and we show up late for -- well, we think it's late -- they had just actually opened the restaurant for lunch, at this tiny, little, out-of-the-way hotel. And none of us had any language with the waiter, but we somehow showed him where we were going. He was so proud of what had happened to that part of his world that nobody had ever noticed before. *That* he could communicate. I just thought it was really so special. It was really a great moment. I was very happy. It seemed like it was a big bridge, not just across that body of water there.

GEHRY: Well, I suspect that when Bob got there, he realized that we were at least aesthetic partners in some way.

GEHRY: All I was looking for in buildings was something that expressed humanity in the banal world we live in, in which architecture is rationalized into banal boxes by developers and people who don't demand better.

THOMAS: I live in Washington, D.C. As you know, we're the worst criminals.

GEHRY: So, it's all good. We all did good.

THOMAS: Yes. Well, it was a pleasure talking with you.

[End of Interview]

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