

Interview with ED RUSCHA

Artist

Conducted by Karen Thomas, Interviewer

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KAREN THOMAS: I wanted to ask you was when you first became aware of Bob's work.

ED RUSCHA: I was first aware probably about 1958-'59. I had seen a magazine reproduction of his work, the one with the chicken.

THOMAS: The one that's the *Combine* called *Untitled* and it's got a man with a white shoe?

RUSCHA: Yes. Is that not a relative of his from Texas?

THOMAS: I don't know. I was at MOCA the other day, and I saw the *White Shoes*, and I thought, "I wonder if somebody Bob knew owned those shoes." The curator said, "Oh, no, they represent Bob and his white paintings."

RUSCHA: Oh. [Laughter]

THOMAS: It was a very strong piece.

RUSCHA: Yes. That's the first work that I saw of his, and maybe also *Canyon*. They woke me up because no one at that time was working in that mode. The Abstract Expressionists were always dominant then. They had full voice on everything made in the world of art, and here was something a little bit off, out of sync with all of that. I appreciated that. Also, I had a great attraction to the work of Kurt Schwitters. I felt, well, this is similar to the thing that Kurt Schwitters did in Germany in 1918, or so, where he collects trolley tickets off the ground, trash off the streets, pastes them together, and makes collages. Rauschenberg was doing this in a more grandiose, sculptural way. I didn't see his work so much connected to painting as it was grabbing forgotten items off the street and composing them into art works.

So that was my first connection to him. Then I saw Jasper Johns' work. To realize that these guys were compatriots on the scene, and that Johns was doing his very different notion of what he considered art, and Rauschenberg was doing his at the same time, and they were pals -- that completed the story for me.

THOMAS: Do you think that you were not unique in that regard? That there were a lot of artists for whom Bob and Jasper were doing something that was so completely different from what everybody else had been doing, that it really did raise the curtain for an awful lot of people on a new way of thinking?

RUSCHA: I think so. I guess you could chop the whole scene up in a lot of different ways and look at it, realizing that these two artists were emerging about the same time as there was a dominant [group] -- the Abstract Expressionist artists, who were in a club of their own -- and to see how they sparked off into some different direction, that it marked something hot and different.

THOMAS: You were in Los Angeles at this time, correct?

RUSCHA: Yes.

THOMAS: I know Virginia Dwan did a show of Bob's *Combines* in 1960, I think. Would you have been around to see that?

RUSCHA: I did see that. I was still a student at that time but I went to galleries and the Dwan Gallery was one of those places I went. Ferus Gallery was the other place, but it was a miniscule art world compared to today.

THOMAS: And did it build because of Ferus and Dwan?

RUSCHA: I think so. I would say that those two galleries were focal points of younger artists and they saw those two galleries as particularly strong. Nicholas Wilder was another, and Rolf Nelson was another gallery. David Stuart, a little bit maybe. But there were always little efforts here and there to open up a new gallery with new ideas. History marches on, and that happened in the early '60s.

THOMAS: And the Ferus Gallery -- that was Irving Blum and Walter Hopps, right?

RUSCHA: Yes.

THOMAS: What a dynamic duo. I've never met Irving Blum, but I did meet Walter Hopps.

RUSCHA: Oh, good. Good. You got to meet Walter Hopps. Let me touch you! [Laughter]

THOMAS: I was in shock, actually. I was at the Corcoran, and he was hanging the white show of Bob's. This is an old building, the Corcoran Museum of Art, and here he is, smoking cigarettes, and they let him! That was all I needed to know about Walter Hopps.

RUSCHA: He got special dispensation, I think. [Laughter]

THOMAS: But he was important here, wasn't he?

RUSCHA: Walter was immediately, I think, on the scene. He came from Eagle Rock, which is out near Pasadena, and he was very well aware of all the artists that were happening at that time, locally as well as internationally. So he probably knew Rauschenberg at that time. Walter was also a champion of artists who had not necessarily made it or not necessarily had a voice in the community. He even, to some degree, favored those artists who were iconoclastic and removed from the scene. He had special respect for artists who wanted to just make their art and not fight the gallery scene. That made him particularly scholarly in that respect.

THOMAS: And beloved, I would imagine.

RUSCHA: Yes. Especially by the artists. He had peculiar traits and was very articulate at the same time.

THOMAS: Everyone talks about Ileana Sonnabend's eye -- that she had a great sense of taste. She knew what she liked. Witness all these people that she and Leo represented in New York. I wonder whether or not Walter and Irving Blum had that attitude here.

RUSCHA: Yes. They had an original point of view on things, and they were willing to take on things that were not proven and acceptable, because they weren't in it to turn a buck. That we know. It's proven by their bottom line. [Laughter]

THOMAS: Did you have the fortune and misfortune? I think you did, working with Ferus Gallery.

RUSCHA: I worked with Ferus Gallery, and I saw right away the fallacy of an artist thinking that a gallery is supposed to take care of everything. Usually, when problems start between an artist and a gallery it has to do with bad record-keeping or something on the part of the artist. I managed to keep good records and I never had any unpleasant experience with the Ferus Gallery, which was mostly run by Irving because Walter by that time, I think, in the early '60s, had pulled away from there, and started directing the Pasadena Museum.

Irving was more attracted to the spectacle of, maybe the publicity of art, and how you could make something out of nothing. When an artist comes along and does that then he's really alert -- like his exposure to Andy Warhol, and other artists, too. He was taking some chances in this but he had, as you say, a good eye. Walter was much more scholarly. But the combination of those two I'm sure is what got that gallery going.

THOMAS: Right. Really dynamic. So, when did you actually first meet Rauschenberg?

RUSCHA: Did he attend Marcel Duchamp's opening at the Pasadena Museum? I forget whether he did or not.

THOMAS: He came out here on a couple of occasions. One would have been driving around with Merce Cunningham, as the property master, lighting designer -- whatever -- for the Cunningham Dance Company. I know they did national tours so that could have been a way that

he would have been here. Then the other was when he first -- I guess it was '67-'68 -- was invited to Gemini.

RUSCHA: Yes. Was it that late -- '67-'68?

THOMAS: Yes. They opened in '66, and Bob was not the first person who worked with Gemini. The irony was that Josef Albers was, and Josef Albers had been his teacher at Black Mountain.

RUSCHA: Oh, yes.

THOMAS: So Bob came -- I know he was there '67-'68, and did that piece he called *Booster*.

RUSCHA: *Booster*. Yes. That was the biggest print ever made at that time.

THOMAS: At that time. Yes. Exactly. I think he really liked it at Gemini and out here.

RUSCHA: Apparently so. He came back many, many times to make projects. I would see him on occasion. That's when I would see him, mostly. I didn't see him in New York very often.

THOMAS: Did you work at Gemini also?

RUSCHA: Yes. I did some things there in the late '60s.

THOMAS: Did you overlap?

RUSCHA: Not physically there, time-wise, I don't think. But I would certainly see him there at Gemini, and I got to talk to him. I met him. So maybe it was like mid-'60s toward the late '60s that I met him. But I'm sure I met him out here.

THOMAS: Did you have a sense of his personality? I was told by somebody that early on in his career he was a rather shy person.

RUSCHA: I find that hard to believe. [Laughter] Well, you knew him, right?

THOMAS: Yes. I can't remember who told me that and I remember thinking, "Really?" But I feel like I have to ask if there was ever that side of him.

RUSCHA: No. No. I mean, congenial, yes. He was very congenial. He wasn't a snob. I think he had a streak of honesty about him that you might call a bullshit meter or something like that, that he was able to keep his feet on the ground as far as his beliefs. But I wouldn't describe him as shy. Now he may have gone through a period when he was but he seemed to me to be loaded with confidence. Some artists that you might tend to respect are artists who are quiet, introspective, and removed. I know artists like that and it seems to back up their work. It seems to fortify their work, their shyness, if you want to say it that way, but more like their sobriety, or you know and Bob could be a back-slapper, and a funny man. When somebody goes off and

makes a life like his, and is able to be self-effacing and have a good time at the same time, then you see a different dimension.

THOMAS: And the quiet, reticent one makes me think immediately of Jasper.

RUSCHA: Yes. In a comparison of the two, that's true. I think almost anybody would agree with you.

THOMAS: Was there ever a time that he was outgoing, and somebody that you would more imagine being with Bob, than this really quiet fellow?

RUSCHA: Well, Jasper always came out with good one-liners, but Rauschenberg just seemed to manufacture them.

THOMAS: And loved to have, I think, a lot of people around him.

RUSCHA: Yes. That's what I never understood. I never understood how he could make all this work with all these people around and turn the TV on all day. He lived with the TV. It was not a route for me to take, but he certainly did, and made a - by his personal appearance at things -- began making sense, with his art and the way he acted around it.

THOMAS: Did you ever see him in the studio, with all that happening?

RUSCHA: I never spent much time doing that. Actually, there's a friend of mine right here, who's building a thing for me out here, who used to work for Bob in New York -- Steve Steinman.. He had more on-hands experience than I did. [Laughs]

THOMAS: I was only around Bob working once or twice, but I know that he liked to have that community of people around him.

RUSCHA: Yes. *Relished it.* Wouldn't survive without it.

THOMAS: Almost like a family to him. (ER: Yeah.) I think he really enjoyed having that team, and he didn't like being alone.

RUSCHA: I can believe that. I certainly can. He didn't like being alone.

THOMAS: Somebody told me recently that they were working for Bob in New York, and one evening he just disappeared. He came back an hour and a half later. "Well, where have you been?" He said, "You know, I'm never alone, so I just went to the bar, and I sat there for an hour and a half, to see if I liked it. And I don't." [Laughter]

RUSCHA: That's so much like him.

THOMAS: You worked together on a piece for "Change," didn't you, in '78?

RUSCHA: Yes. I could show you the thing. Do you want to see it? I think I have it here. Here it is. This is around 1978.

THOMAS: I'd like to ask you how it all happened. All I know about it is the title, and that it was for "Change."

RUSCHA: Change, Inc. He started this foundation with the help of Stanley Grinstein, I believe, from Gemini. You know, "Change" came from as in "spare change," for artists who were having trouble, not because they didn't have materials or they couldn't afford to buy paints or what-have-you, but an artist who has some misfortune, and needed immediate money.

So he started [Change], and we had a Los Angeles chapter, and I got involved in it. I was talking to Bob about this, and he said, "Let's make a poster", or "Let's make some posters." I said, "Well, why don't we make a poster together?" My idea was to divide it in half and make it vertical. "You take the left-hand side, I take the right-hand side, and let's not discuss it, or show each other what we're doing, until it actually comes off the press." [Laughs]

So that's what we did. This was the product. Then, to our surprise when we both looked at this piece, we realized that both of us had used Scotch plaid in our design.



[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Stay Safe, 1978, 35 x 23", color poster*]

RUSCHA: Mine, right here, on this side ["Stay Safe"] --

THOMAS: And his on that side.

RUSCHA: So we were stunned about that. We had a fundraiser where we signed these prints on a big table over at L.A. County Museum, and I think they raised some money for that. We sold these posters. I don't know for how much, but that's the origin of this. I managed to get a few of these myself.

I don't know exactly whatever happened to "Change," but --

THOMAS: Yes. It still exists. And Bradley Jeffries, on Bob's staff, manages it.

RUSCHA: Oh. Really. Gosh. I would have bet that that just kind of faded away.

THOMAS: No, it was something that Bob, as you know, believed in and, as we imagine, the need is even stronger now. That's a great story. You were both drawn to the same visual.

I hadn't realized that Stanley Grinstein was involved in that.

RUSCHA: Yes. He was part of this, organizing it and getting us together.

THOMAS: What was your sense of Gemini's role as pushing the boundaries of printmaking? And secondly was, does Bob have any relationship to that boundary pushing, also?

RUSCHA: Ken Tyler was the first printer over there at Gemini. He got printmaking going, the idea of traditional lithography. Then, when Gemini came together with Sidney Felsen and Stanley Grinstein, they combined forces. I forget now the history, but at some point Ken Tyler dropped out and went on his own. But Gemini, from the early times was actually encouraging artists to not just think the limited thought of making lithographs, but, rather, making art works, and that includes three-dimensional things made of unconventional materials but still with the attitude that you were making multiple art works. That was really encouraged, and shown to us by Claes Oldenburg, and Ed Kienholz, and Rauschenberg, and several other artists who made three-dimensional pieces, sculptural pieces, instead of just limiting themselves with lithography. But right up to today, they're still making lithographs.

THOMAS: Amazing things.

RUSCHA: And etchings. They were late to come to etching. I think that was much later on. But they were doing silk-screen prints. I did some silk-screen with them. But all along they maintained sort of the work idea of producing lithographs. So Gemini was a real forerunner in that world of multiple graphics.

THOMAS: Are there many other places like Gemini?

RUSCHA: I'm sure there are a lot in Europe and in the United States. There are some places in New York that do that. Bill Goldston does that. He's done things with Richard Tuttle, wood pieces.

THOMAS: I didn't realize that. I was thinking he was doing mostly lithography.

RUSCHA: Oh, yes. He did things with a number of artists using digital technology, a broad field of approaches to multiple art making. I would say that if there is a place on the East Coast, it would be Bill Goldston's -- Universal Art.

THOMAS: I think so, too. Did you [and Bob] work on anything else together?

RUSCHA: No. Let's see. What did I do? I always loved the word "ace." Bob titled one of his works "Ace," early on [1962]. As a point of gesture, I sent him this little painting I did, called *ACE*, which he eventually gave to the Museum of Modern Art. So we were both fond of that word, I guess -- ace. [Laughs]

THOMAS: I spent some time with Laddie Dill, and he was talking about titles, that Bob would work very hard to find titles that would not necessarily relate to the work but were another little bit of a piece to the puzzle, so that you'd have to figure out a connection. He would use those titles to push you forward.

RUSCHA: It's almost a forgotten after-thought in the world of art, the titles. Artists, mostly, want to make their work, and then title them, and feel obligated to title them, to identify them with some sort of stamp, or word. I've always felt titles are really essential. I think of the title first, and then paint a picture of it or something.

THOMAS: What else should I ask you? Or what else would you like to say about Bob?

RUSCHA: You know, he was a delight to be around. No doubt about that. I don't know. I always identified with him. I loosened up around him because of his accent. He had this rolling, south Texas accent, and I have a bit of that in my speech, from Oklahoma. So I think I would say that I said something like, "Oh, I did that for a library," and he'd say, "No, you mean 'libeery.'" That's just the way they actually say it back there -- libeery. [Laughs] He'd correct me. [Laughter]

THOMAS: I heard that you spoke at the memorial service. I think you imitated his laugh.

RUSCHA: Well, as you recall, he had a pretty wicked laugh, didn't he? Sort of a spastic giggle that would sometimes end up in a roar. [Laughter] You knew he was coming when he was laughing.

THOMAS: I spent some time with his wife, Susan, and she said that they were in Paris together in '48 and she said you could hear him laughing all over Paris, that same laugh.

Did you see the *Combine* show?

RUSCHA: I did. The one at MOCA?

THOMAS: At MOCA, yes. Actually, they have that piece that you were talking about ...

RUSCHA: The man standing in the white suit and the white shoes.

RUSCHA: That work was owned by Ed Janss, Edwin Janss, who was a believer in the thinking of Walter Hopps. They were good friends. Walter, I think, encouraged Ed Janss -- who had never really been into buying art before -- to buy this work. So Ed Janss had this work for many years. He was also instrumental in buying works by H.C. Westerman, and I think that's all because of Walter Hopps.

THOMAS: I'm glad to know that Bob shook you up when you first saw him.

RUSCHA: Oh, yes. Yes. God. You could call him an entertainer. He did everything but dance. And he would do that, too, I think -- dance on roller skates.

[End of interview.]

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