

Stories Project. ACC 54.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Ute Stebich holds a master's degree in art history from The Institute of Fine Art, New York University (NYU). She worked as an independent curator for museums in the United States specializing in Haitian Art, Outsider Art, and Folk Art. She is the widow of Gerhard Stebich, formerly president of Schenkers International, an art transport service company. With her husband, Stebich met Rauschenberg on Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) business, both in New York and Captiva, Fla.

Transcription of phone interview with Ute Stebich conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on May 12, 2020. Reviewed and edited by the speakers May 25, 2020.

Ute Stebich [US]: Hello?

David White [DW]: It's David again.

US: Yes. Hi David, did you make it work?

DW: Well, we believe so. Actually, my spouse, Anthony [Gammardella] is at my side, who's the technological wizard. So, he said he would just keep an eye on it, just because I hadn't realized that something had gone wrong, but he could see. So, I know it's very, unspontaneous to say the same thing twice, but could I ask you to just say again about your first meeting with [Robert] Bob [Rauschenberg] on Lafayette Street?

US: I got to meet Robert Rauschenberg through my late husband Gerhard. He was the president of Schenkers International, a worldwide logistics company. When the idea for the ROCI project developed Rauschenberg's staff contacted the company for transportation. My husband who loved art took on the project himself. When Bob invited him for lunch at Lafayette Street I begged to come along. At that time I was still a student at The Institute of Fine Art, NYU and for me to have the chance to meet such a famous artist was a dream.

I remember this lunch vividly. A big, hollowed out pumpkin appeared on the table full of deliciously smelling pumpkin soup. The soup was a novelty to me. We came to the States in 1969 and in Germany at that time, nobody ever used pumpkins or squash in cooking. It was so beautifully presented by, I forgot the name again, Sachika?

DW: Sachika Takahashi [Hisachika Takahashi].

US: Sachika, yes. And the table was set in a lovely way and there was a container for salt I liked very much. Bob explained that it was actually a crucible. I didn't really know what it was, and learned that it was used to melt gold. Sachika was asked to go upstairs and get another one and Bob gave it to me as a gift. It was so generous of him and I love this object to this day for its beauty, but also for the memory.

So many things I learned when I was with Bob, are things that I certainly would not have really learned in other ways. He taught me to look more carefully and not stay on the surface.

I also remember that no matter where we were, whether we were in New York or in Captiva [Florida], there was always a television on. Now I'm not a particular friend of television and I noticed that he wasn't really watching

I asked him why the television was going and he said, "Oh." He said, "It's just another window into the world." And that to me was actually very interesting, because here you were in your own world, but somehow through this device, you were able to participate in things going on outside at the same time.

DW: That was his strong point. He was wonderful at that, yeah.

US: Yeah.

DW: One thing, do you recall what year that was? You said you came to America in '69, did you say?

US: Yeah, in 1969 and we arrived by boat, even though it was a luxury boat. I remember the day because it was the same day when the first man landed on the moon, and for me it was a similar experience. I had never been to the United States before in my life and to arrive in New York and with all my expectations, it was a very exciting day. And I have to say, if I had not come to the United States, my life would have been quite different. This country gave me a chance to really develop myself. So, I'm very grateful.

DW: That is such a wonderful recollection. So, then you spoke about going to Captiva, that was a wonderful—

US: Well yes. We were invited to come to Captiva. [Stebich and her husband met Rauschenberg in the early eighties, so this visit would have been in the mid-eighties or later. She does not recall the date.] And I remember that he gave us a house all to ourselves. And the house was filled with the most wonderful Rauschenberg's and even a table that he had made, in front of the sofa. I walked into the kitchen and the refrigerator was generously filled with the most delicious things. And I happened to see a Kleenex box with tissues and they're usually white, but this one was kind of in a pinkish color and it fit the color scheme beautifully. So, I really noticed it.

And when we went over to dinner Bob asked if everything was fine. Of course, I was telling him that it was just perfect and that I didn't think I could sleep because I had to look at all these wonderful Rauschenberg's. And then I said, "Do you know what? Everything is so perfect. Even the color of the Kleenex tissues." And then he and Terry [van Brunt] broke out into this big laughter, and I thought, "Oh my God, what did I say? Was it so stupid?" And then they explained that when Bob invites people he always goes to check to make sure everything is done to his liking. He obviously had a fit because somebody put a Kleenex box of white tissues in the kitchen. It bothered him visually and so he made a fuss about it. And then he looked at Terry and said, "See, I am right? They notice it."

I remember entering his house in Captiva and the sun was illuminating everything. And there was in the corner, a piece of such simplicity but of great genius. I will never forget it. It was three umbrellas that he had opened, each one of a different color, just stacked on top of each other.

And the way the sun hit the grouping it created shadows on the wall. And then I remember he had another piece in the same room. It was a rope, a big rope. But ropes usually are round, right? But this one was braided into a square. And you remember that piece?

DW: Does it have a rock on the end of it?

US: Yes. And he attached it to the ceiling and then it came straight down. And then he turned the end into a spiral with the rock in it.

DW: I love that piece [Untitled (*Venetian*), 1973].



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (*Venetian*), 1973
Rope, string, and stone
178 inches; Dimensions variable (452.1 cm)
RRF 73.011

US: Me too! I mean he certainly was an ingenious artist. And he did exactly what you, as an art historian or passionate art lover want. You want to learn . . . You want to learn to see in new ways. To me, he was THE artist for that.

As I got to know him a little bit more I remembered going to the house on Lafayette [Street]. And at that time, there was all this garbage out in the streets. And Bob used some of these corrugated cardboard pieces and incorporated those into his works. I wondered about that and asked “Bob, aren’t you worried about these pieces lasting, I mean, it’s such fragile material.” He looked at me with astonishment, he said, “Well, I’m the artist, that’s the job of the conservator.”

DW: That's just wonderful.

US: Yeah. I mean, this is all stuff you learn, especially if you are a student. And I always held that spending some time with a great artist was more valuable than taking a course at the Institute of Fine Arts.

I also remember being invited to participate at a dinner given in honor of him at the Leo Castelli Gallery. The entire gallery was filled with big refectory tables and benches. And there were all these famous, famous artists, [James] Rosenquist and [Roy] Lichtenstein among others. It was an amazing atmosphere. Another fantastic memory!

So then of course the highlight in a way was when the ROCI project opened at the Tamayo Museum in Mexico city. [Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MEXICO*, April 17–June 23, 1985.] Were you there?

DW: I was. Yes.

US: Yes. Do you remember the invitation to that incredibly wonderful place? Was it an old monastery? By the man who owned Televisa. He invited Rauschenberg and all these people to this dinner, a Fiesta with Mariachi music. Were you there?

DW: Yeah, I can't recall the man's name [Emilio Azcárraga]. I know exactly who you were speaking of, but yes.

US: Yes. I don't recall the name either, but wasn't that some fabulous event?

DW: It certainly was.

US: By the way David, I seem to remember, and I'm not sure if it is correct or not, that I was sitting right next to Rauschenberg at that dinner. Are there any photographs?

DW: There may well be. We have a big archive, and a wonderful woman [Francine Snyder] who used to be the head of the archives at the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim Museum [New York], who now works for the foundation. And so, she is going through boxes and boxes of things and organizing and digitizing them. I will ask her if she has photographs from the ROCI Mexico opening.

US: Yeah. Oh, that would be so wonderful. If they do, I would love to have a copy of that.

DW: Of course.

US: There were other, for me, quite touching moments, when he told me a little bit about his family. Bob told me that his family did not understand nor appreciated his art. His mother, and he must have really loved his mother because to me, I'm not so sure I would have stayed in touch with her if she treated me that way. But he told me that he had invited her to his show at the

Museum of Modern Art [New York]. It was a big event and the art world celebrated him. Afterwards he asked her, "So what do you think now?" And she responded with contempt and a shrug, "What do these people know?" Such a big disappointment for him. He was craving her love, appreciation, and attention. And it did not seem to get that from his family.

And he was telling me about a nephew, I guess, his sister's son.

DW: Oh right. Rick [Begneaud].

US: Yeah. Being a generous uncle he had given him some art. One day he got a call from Rick asking "Uncle, would you mind if I would sell one of the pieces you gave me?" And Bob said, it flashed through his mind that his nephew would use the money to go on this boat teaching students while travelling around the world. That's what he hoped he was going to do. And I said, "And then what did he do?" He said, "Well, he bought a motorcycle." And that was such a disappointment to him.

But you know what amazed me? And I'm sure that you found that as well, as famous as he was, he was still very vulnerable. He was extremely sensitive and I think easily hurt. I remember going to an opening and, naturally every time there was an opening for him, it was a big event. At some point Bob went into a corner and had a sip of whatever it was, whiskey or something. I happened to see it and when he noticed me, he laughed saying, "I'm so nervous. I'm so nervous. And this helps me." I said, "You must be kidding. You are so famous." He said, "Yeah, but still every time I wonder, I wonder, what will people say? What do they think? Is my art still good enough?" So that to me was a very interesting thing.

DW: You really picked up on a quality he had. It's all very much the case.

US: Yes. And that I think is what made him also so special. He never became jaded. And I thought he was, of course, extremely sophisticated and all of that. But there was also still this wonderful naivety in him. It's the childlike quality that one hopes never to lose. And I really appreciated that very much.

DW: That's what they say about artists, they retain that childlike quality. It certainly was true for him.

US: Yes. Yes.

DW: These are wonderful stories. It's just the kind of thing we were looking for just to add to our archives of people's reactions to Bob, and stories about him. So, this is fabulous.

US: Oh, good. Well, I think that's basically most of the stories. And then, I don't know why but somehow I didn't get to meet him anymore. Yet I'm so grateful that I had that chance to meet him, to learn from him. He really also opened my eyes to much of contemporary art.

DW: You were very lucky as all of us are, who had contact with him. I thank you very, very much. What we'll do is transcribe the recording from the phone. And then we can send you a

copy. So you can, if you want to edit it in one way or another, or add a sentence or detract a sentence, and I think that's the way that works. And we can certainly keep in touch.

US: Okay.

DW: And I'll have Francine look for photographs from the Mexico opening . . .

US: Wouldn't that be wonderful.

DW: . . . try to find something for you.

US: Thank you so very much David.

DW: Many thanks Ute. Thank you.

US: You're most welcome. Take care.

DW: Bye. You too.

US: Bye. Bye, bye.