

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

Mel Bochner is a visual artist. He was an early and pivotal contributor to the development of conceptual art and has worked in a range of media, including drawing, painting, installations, prints, and photography, throughout his six-decade career. He met Robert Rauschenberg in the mid-1960s and later performed in Rauschenberg's *Urban Round* (1967). Bochner recalls that Rauschenberg was the first person to buy one of his artworks.

Transcription of phone interview with Mel Bochner conducted by Julia Blaut, Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on June 23, 2014. Reviewed and edited by the speakers in 2022.

Julia Blaut [JB]: Thank you so much for doing this. Going over things in the last day or so, I just noticed how many overlaps you and Bob [Robert Rauschenberg] had, which I hadn't really realized. Well, how did you meet Bob? Was it in '64? Was that when you were at the Jewish Museum [New York]?

Mel Bochner [MB]: Well, I don't think I really met him then, but I think it's the first time I ever saw him. They were having a party I think to celebrate his victory at the Venice Biennale, if I'm not mistaken [in June of 1964 Rauschenberg was awarded the International Grand Prize in Painting at the 32nd Venice Biennale]. But it was a party in his honor, and I was a guard and I was just standing there watching the party [laughs]. So that's the first time I saw him.

I don't really remember how I met him, but it was such a different time. Everybody was around. You could meet anybody, and since practically everybody you wanted to meet or wanted to know, at one point or another, was at Max's Kansas City [a nightclub and restaurant in New York], I'm just kind of remembering that somebody introduced us there. So otherwise, I don't remember.

JB: Someplace I read, and I don't know if this was by you or somebody else, that when Jasper [Johns] had his show at the Jewish Museum [Feb. 16–April 12, 1964] was maybe the first time that you had an awareness of Bob's art.

MB: No, that's not true. The first awareness that I had of his art was Calvin Tomkins' article in the *New Yorker*. [Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Moving Out," *New Yorker* 40, no. 2 (Feb. 29, 1964), pp. 39–105.] It was before I came to New York and at a point where I was very stuck in my own work and I was, more or less, in the provinces and wasn't aware of what was going on in New York. Abstract Expressionism was still news to me. And I saw that article and I read it, and in some way, it turned my thinking inside out. I particularly remember instead of a conventional portrait of an artist, it was a thumbprint, and it said, "Portrait of R.R." [*Self Portrait [for The New Yorker profile]*, 1964]. That made a tremendous impression on me, and the idea that I took away was being an artist was being free to do whatever he wanted to do. And Rauschenberg at that point and forever after always represented freedom to me.



Robert Rauschenberg
Self-Portrait [for The New Yorker profile], 1964
Ink and graphite on paper
2 5/8 x 2 3/4 inches, mounted on sheet size 11 7/8 x 8 7/8
inches (6.7 x 7 cm, mounted on sheet size 30.2 x 22.5 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
RRF 64.D006

JB: Oh, that's great. So you were in one of Bob's performances?

MB: Yeah, I was in the one at School of Visual Arts [*Urban Round*, 1967]. I have almost no memory of it, except that it was different pairings of people and you were against something like a signboard and you were back to back with someone pressing against them trying to hold this signboard up moved around the space. It was kind of chaotic, basically [*laughs*]. As I remember it, it was not one of his more memorable things.



Urban Round, Fall Gallery Concerts, School of Visual Arts, New York, November 19, 1967. Pictured: the ensemble including Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, Yvonne Rainer, Christopher Rauschenberg, and other friends, including Rauschenberg's assistants Brice Marden and Dorothea Rockburne. Photo: Peter Moore.

JB: You also attended a performance choreographed by Bob that must have been *Map Room II* [1965]. I also sent you a couple of those photos with the Arman shoes . . .



Rauschenberg in *Map Room II*, New Cinema Festival I, Film-Makers' Cinematheque, Forty-first Street Theater, New York, December 17, 1965. Photo: Peter Moore.

MB: Yeah. They're cast resin. Yes, I remember that very, very clearly. That was really, in the terms of the time, a mindblower. He came out from the side of the stage with the shoes cast in those blocks so that he couldn't lift his feet. So much of what he did was about—or at least I always thought was about—putting obstacles in his own way, doing something to make whatever he did more difficult for himself. I think that was partially because of his innate facility, but also it was like a philosophical point. And so he comes out sort of shuffling in these white bucks, which was kind of resonant too because white bucks have so many symbolic meanings about the fifties and about college. It's very resonant.

Anyway, he shuffles out and he bends down, and as I remember, there was very low lighting on the stage, and Debbie [Deborah] Hay was doing something in the foreground. And he bends down and there's a glass tube, an unattached glass tube. I believe it was unattached. It might have been a wire. It's so long ago. Anyway, he bends down and he picks it up. And as he picks it up, raises it above his head. It turns out to be a neon light and it comes on and it glows and it's just amazing when it happened.

And I suppose that the plastic was somehow a ground and I suppose it's something that Billy Klüver had invented, but it was such a powerful image of him then shuffling off to stage left, as I remember it, with his arm above his head holding this lit neon bulb.

JB: I think you're right. I think it was Billy who had rigged this whole thing and the idea was that the shoes would be kind of grounding so they don't get electrocuted. But Steve Paxton said that apparently in rehearsal, Billy and Bob just passed it back and forth between them with no grounding whatsoever. So he thought it was a ruse to make it appear as though it was a very high-risk situation when, in fact, it may not have been [*laughs*].

MB: Theater is illusion, right?

JB: That's right. One thing that was striking to me in *Map Room II* and also *Urban Round* is that both of those performances seemed to have a whole word element, which to me is funny because Bob was not a reader and was very dyslexic and yet words play a big role in his art.

MB: I agree that he was not a reader, per se, but his titles are probably the best titles of any artist that I can think of. I don't know how he came up with them, where he got those titles, but they always are so amazing and some of the words – like, I think of that painting at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York] of the horizontal stripes in red and yellow, the title is *Yoicks* [1954].



Robert Rauschenberg
Yoicks, 1954
Oil, fabric, and newspaper on two canvases
96 x 72 inches (243.8 x 182.9 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift
of the artist

And the one with the chair in front of the painting is called *Pilgrim* [1960]. If you sit down in the chair, you can't see the painting. They're always so appropriate and so associative. I once asked him if he had ever read *Alice in Wonderland* because I always thought there was a kind of through-the-looking-glass quality to his work, like seeing the world backwards, basically. And he said, "No." And I said, "Well, where did you get the idea for a *Factum I* and *Factum II* [both 1957]? Because that's a kind of Lewis Carroll sort of notion of these two things, which are identical, but different.



Robert Rauschenberg
Pilgrim, 1960
Combine: oil, graphite, paper, printed paper, and fabric on canvas with painted wood chair
79 1/4 x 53 7/8 x 18 5/8 inches (201.3 x 136.8 x 47.3 cm)
Private collection



Robert Rauschenberg
Factum I, 1957
Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas
61 1/2 x 35 3/4 inches (156.2 x 90.8 cm)
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Panza Collection



Robert Rauschenberg
Factum II, 1957
Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas
61 3/8 x 35 1/2 inches (155.9 x 90.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

And he said, “Oh, no, no, no. That came from an experience I had when I was a kid. We lived on the edge of this huge vacant lot, and on the other side of the lot there was an ice cream store. And my mother gave me two nickels to buy us each a vanilla ice cream. So I had one nickel in one hand and one nickel in the other hand.” He said, “I ran like hell across this vacant lot ‘cause it was dark and it was scary. I got to the ice cream place, I plunked down the two nickels, I bought the two vanilla ice cream cones, ran back across the vacant lot, and fell down, and the ice cream cone in my right hand spilled out. And when I got home, I gave that one to my mother and said, ‘Here, here’s your ice cream.’”

I don’t know how that becomes *Factum I* and *Factum II*. But there’s something there, and it’s an amazing kind of parable [laughs].

But he was brilliant. I have to say I’ve known a lot of artists in my time and a lot of really smart artists, but I never met any other artist that was that much fun to talk to, whose conversation was so alive and so sharp. He was just sharp. He got the point and he then would laugh and turn it into something else so that the conversation with him was always really an adventure. And a long time ago I came to the conclusion that you can judge the intelligence of another person by how intelligent you feel when you’re talking to them [laughs].

And when you were talking to Bob, you had to be pretty sharp to stay in a conversation because between his wit and his sense of humor and the depth of his experience of things, it was an adventure.

JB: You had written a review at one point of the Dante drawings (1958–60).



Robert Rauschenberg

Canto I: The Dark Wood of Error; Canto XIV: Circle Seven, Round 3, The Violent Against God, Nature, and Art; and Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge, The Giants, all from the series *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*, 1958

Solvent transfer with pencil, gouache, and colored pencil on paper

Each 14 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches (36.8 x 29.2 cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

MB: Yeah, I did. I think I wrote that review in '65 or maybe early '66. [Bochner, "In the Museums: Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts Magazine* 40, no. 5 (March 1966), pp. 50–51.] It was probably one of the first reviews that I wrote and I was really bowled over by that exhibition. It was certainly the first time I'd seen those drawings. People think [of] those drawings as being very off-the-top-of-the-head kind of things. They're not. They're very deeply thought out and they're really very related to the Dante [text] that he's illustrating. I thought they were amazing. They're very focused and also, they're a size that I don't think he ever worked on again. I can't remember any small-scale drawings like that.

I'll tell you a funny story. I was visiting him in Florida once and there wasn't anything to do after dinner. He usually cooked dinner and there was always a gang around, and then everybody just watched T.V. And while everybody was watching T.V., Bob had a perch in the kitchen, which looked into the living room where the T.V. was, and he would do drawings. He would work on the transfer drawings.

And I was watching him do that because they just totally fascinated me, and at one point, he said, "You've been watching me doing this for a long time." And I said, "Yeah, I'm really interested in how you do it." He said, "Well, do you think you could do it?" And I said, "I don't know. I think I could" because I'd seen how he laid down the wash and how he transferred the drawing and all those kind of things.

So he said, "Okay, why don't you try it?" So I tried it, and I made a horrific mess of it [*laughs*]. And he said, "Okay, now watch." And he took the drawing that I had made this terrific mess of and transformed it in about a minute into this absolutely beautiful drawing. Whatever happened to that drawing, I don't know, but somebody somewhere owns a drawing that I had a hand in. An anonymous hand in . . .

JB: So that must have been in the seventies, you think, or later?

MB: No, maybe '69, something like that, or '70, somewhere around there when I went down to visit him in Captiva.

JB: Did you get the photographs that I forwarded you that we think are yours?

MB: Yeah, I was certainly there. I remember that event, the painting of those paintings, and I think that's a great piece, *Soundings* [1968], a really great piece, and I think it was Bob's way of responding to what was going on in conceptual art and his odd way of coming into a conversation because the whole thing with Plato is about the chair, the real chair, the illusion chair, the real chair, the form of the chair, and all of that. And I think he was, in an intuitive way, playing with those kinds of ideas. And I think it's an amazing thing, and I did watch them, and that is Brice [Marden] by the way, for sure. Nobody else wore a hat like that. But I can't say for sure that I took those photos.



Negatives and contact sheet: Robert Rauschenberg and Brice Marden silkscreening Plexiglas panels for *Soundings* (1968) in the chapel of Rauschenberg's 381 Lafayette Street studio, 1968. Photo: Attributed to Mel Bochner.



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Robert Rauschenberg

Soundings, 1968

Mirrored Plexiglas and silkscreen ink
on Plexiglas with concealed electric
lights and electronic components
96 x 432 x 54 inches (243.8 x 1097.3
x 137.2 cm)

Museum Ludwig, Cologne

JB: And didn't you do some sort of collaboration with Experiments in Technology (E.A.T.), the program that Bob started with Billy?

MB: I did a couple of things with them. One was this project with—I think it was called the Amalgamated Lithographers Union. They were up on University Place and Eleventh Street. And the guy who was the president or the head of the union was interested in getting artists to come in and work at the school. They had a school in that building where members of the union could improve their skills and upgrade their standing in the union. So they were constantly printing things, but they didn't really have things to print, so he thought of artists doing projects.

And of course, I'm sure he wanted Bob as the artist, but instead, I was chosen, Marj [Marjorie] Strider, and Brice. And so we each did separate projects. Unfortunately, the guy—I don't know what happened with Marj or with Brice—hated what I was doing and he pulled the plug. I never got any prints out of it [*laughs*]. I just got a couple of proofs.

And then I did another project with the Singer Corporation famous for sewing machines, but by that time, were into aerospace and things like that. They had a lab out in New Jersey and I think they were sort of jealous of Bell Labs and sort of in competition with them to invent things. And because Bell Labs had artists like Bob and I don't know who else go out there, they contacted E.A.T. and asked for some suggestions of artists to invite out. And so they sent a couple of proposals and mine was chosen. So for about three months, maybe September, October, November, December, somewhere around there, 1968, I would get on a bus twice a week and go out to the Singer Labs in Denville, New Jersey. Basically it was like a think tank with some of their engineers and scientists and different people would circulate in and out.

We'd just sit around and talk all day and try to find something that we had in common to talk about. And eventually, it came down to the concept of measurement because scientists won't trust anything that doesn't have measurements. In other words, that isn't objectifiable. And it was out of that experience that all of my measurement pieces came, from thinking about that and talking to them. So that was a really, really important experience for me.

And then I did a third project with E.A.T., which I proposed, which was to hire a product photographer, those guys who photograph beer bottles and vegetables and bags of peas. And I wanted him to take a series of photographs for me that would eliminate my decision-making; in other words, he would compose the photographs and choose the colors and the lenses and all of that, and it would totally eliminate my taste from the project, and that's the one I got the grant for. For then it was a huge amount of money because those photographers charge three hundred dollars an hour. So I bought an hour of his time.

And I went in there with a piece of glass and a can of shaving cream and some petroleum jelly, and I just smeared the glass with petroleum jelly, and I gave it to him, and I said, "Okay, photograph this any way you want." So he used different kinds of lights and gels. He thought I was nuts. Why anybody would want to photograph a piece of glass with petroleum jelly smeared all over it? But the project came out very well, as far as I was concerned, and I have to thank Bob and Francis Mason, who was the head then of E.A.T., for their generosity. So yes, I benefited a great deal from Experiments in Art and Technology.

JB: I just wanted to go back to one thing that you mentioned at the beginning. You were saying that at the time, you think the art world was so much smaller and that someone probably introduced you to Bob at Max's Kansas City. I'm wondering if you have some memories of being with Bob socially during that time. Any specific memories?

MB: Let me see. Well, by the late sixties, Bob's reputation was waning, shall we say, among artists. And there were even some artists who were quite hostile towards him. Remember, you're in a period when Minimalism and Conceptualism and earth art and things like that are the topics of conversation. And I think, in a way, Bob was seen as the figure, more or less, of the past, which I never understood.

But there were people who were very hostile to him at the bar. And he was never hostile to anybody. I thought that it was kind of unfair, but that was the way things were at that point. But there were always artists like myself and Brice and other people who stood up for him and took his side.

I do remember that his favorite restaurant was on Fifty-sixth Street and was called the Arirang House with all these kinds of people there. Nobody ever remembered what the food was because there was this unbelievably potent cocktail called a Ginseng cocktail, which was stronger than any drug that was circulating around at that time *[laughs]*. And people would get quite rowdy, actually, but it was always a lot of fun.

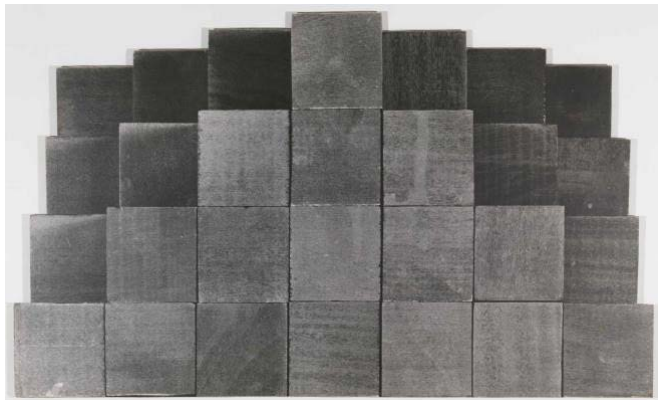
JB: So were you at his studio? Well, you were at 381 Lafayette Street because that's where the *Soundings* photographs were taken. Were you at any of the earlier studios?

MB: No I wasn't. I actually stayed at 381 for a while. I lost my loft on Chambers Street and was having trouble finding a new place and Bob was down in Florida and he said, "Why don't you stay at 381 until you find a new loft?" So that's what I did. I stayed there for a couple of months. And it was a period when [Cy] Twombly was around a lot. I don't think he was staying there. I

think he was in his own loft on the Bowery, but he was always around and that's when and how I got to know Cy.

But this is all ancient history. I'm not sure why anybody would be interested [*laughs*]. Bob, as an artist and a figure, was very important to me and I feel that my work has a certain debt to him, but also, he was really kind and generous to me as a person. He was the first person ever to buy a work of mine.

That photo, that cutout photo piece that's like a stack of blocks [*(N+1) Center Sets (Series A, #4) Front View, 1966-68*], he bought that. It was the first thing I'd ever sold.



Mel Bochner
(N+1) Center Sets (Series A, #4) Front View, 1966-68
Photographs mounted on shaped Masonite
50 x 83 5/8 inches (127 x 212.4 cm)
Private collection

You could imagine how amazing that was to me because, basically, at that time, nobody was really interested [*laughs*] in what I was doing. And I invited Bob over to my studio, and he had done photography. He was probably the only person at that moment who understood that a photograph could be a work of art.

Most people looked at photographs and thought, "Sorry, this isn't art." And so his acceptance and purchase of that was enormously important. And then he, a few years later, bought the measurement of the plant [*Measurement Group C, 1969*] which I installed in 381 for him. So he was very supportive of my work, and all those grants that that I got from E.A.T., those things really kept me going. So I'm happy to do this and put my memories on record.



Mel Bochner
Measurement Group C, 1969
Tape and vinyl on wall with plant
99 x 99 1/2 inches (251.5 x 252.7 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation