

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Unidentified / Robert Rauschenberg Interview / Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy, 1990

VERZ. DR:ArtScienceSpirituality:20- 4-90 ; 21:52 ; in changing Economy-818 472 8257 ;# 2

Art meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy

Mr. Robert Rauschenberg
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Amsterdam, 26 April 1990

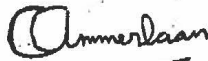
Dear Ms. Bradley Jeffries,

Herewith you receive the edited text interview we would want to publish in our book/catalogue that is to come out next August.

Would you please be so kind to correct any errors you may find and send those corrections back to us as soon as possible, at the latest before the 10th of May.

With gratitude,

Yours Sincerely,



Catherina Ammerlaan
Assistant to Louwrien Wijers

APR 26 '90 15:50

011 - 3120229056 PAGE.002

Robert Rauschenberg

P.O. Box 54, Captiva, Florida 33924

VIA FAX

MAY 9, 1990

Catherina Ammerlaan
Assistant to Louwrien Wijers

5/10

PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE
RECEIPT OF THIS 14-PAGE
FAX FROM 5/9

B. Jeffries

Dear Ms. Ammerlaan,

The following pages contain the revised text of the Rauschenberg interview, as per your request.

Please note CAREFULLY the revisions (for clarity), corrections and deletions. Except for spelling or typing errors, we trust you will use this revision.

If you have any questions, please send them via fax.

Cordially,

Bradley Jeffries
Ms. Bradley Jeffries
Assistant to
Robert Rauschenberg

PAM - NO response yet -
Here is text if they
call or FAX w/
questions -

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Art meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy

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Amsterdam, 19 May 1990

Dear Bradley,

I wanted to thank you very much indeed for the excellent edit of the text-interview. I have personally inserted all your corrections. The interview has become much better.

Please tell Robert Rauschenberg I am still talking to Mr. Wim Beeren, director of the Stedelijk Museum, about a one man exhibition. I still have the catalogues here that you gave me for that purpose. They will come back to you in due time.

I hope all is well for everyone there.

With best wishes,

Louwrien.

Louwrien Wijers

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**FAX
COVER
SHEET**

SENDING TO

CATHERINA AMMERLAAN

FROM

BRADLEY JEFFRIES

FAX 813-472-8257

Number of pages transmitted including this one: 14

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Robert Rauschenberg

P.O. Box 54, Captiva, Florida 33924

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG INTERVIEW 13 SEPTEMBER 1990 CAPTIVA, FLORIDA

Q. What a contrast between "the real world" outside this beautiful place here on Captiva Island! What is your vision of the world in which we live?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: For the first part of your question I have to say that I am living on the brink of erosion since this is a sand island. I prefer to be here, where there is some pleasure involved, some indulgence, and what we call real nature. Even though I am at a risk living here. The hurricanes make it extremely risky but I would rather be here, where I can swim and fish, than live in some place in Kansas, where you don't know if some garbage is buried under your house and is poisoning the universe and your children.

Q. You have seen a lot of erosion. You have made many trips over the years to Cuba, Venezuela, China and Tibet. What have you seen?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I didn't go there looking for erosion; I went there to look at society and the folks who live there. I can't describe what I have seen so simply. We're going now to Kuala Lumpur, though I'm sure that the coronation we are attending will not necessarily represent the people.

Q. So you have seen a lot of corrosion among people in the countries you have visited?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I've seen a lot of injustice, but I think it is worldwide. I'm not a communist or a socialist, but I recognize the fact that we must pay attention to the total world. On a little ball, like the earth, you can't isolate yourself. I do understand how the economics of dealing with the rainforest--to make farmland for the farmers--does make sense, but only locally. What we have to do is somehow establish a successful society in which everyone is educated to realize that we're just on this little ball here, and everything we do makes a difference everywhere. We have been extravagant in our development and the world is really frighteningly small. We're having to think about where we could go if we find it is too small. It's no good one group of people killing another since that doesn't make more space!

(more)

< Please note it is
Culture, NOT
Cultural

Q. Where do we stand in ART today?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Well, unlike most people I believe that art is not a series of successful, stylistic, historical continuities, but simply a means of communication. My contribution, the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI)--which is devoted to peace and communication with video, with photographs, with art and one-to-one contact--is over. I'll admit with some embarrassment that I'm looking forward to winding it up because I have great curiosity about the exploration of unprogrammed activities.

I took on a great responsibility: in Russia fifteen to twenty-thousand people a day queued up to enter. When we were in Tibet people were paying their way into an extraordinary event--something they had never seen. It was the first exhibition ever held in Tibet. In China we had the entire National Museum and fifteen videos, things that people had not experienced before.

Q. Would you say then that many artists are too concerned with commercialism?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I wouldn't call it commercialism. I think a lot of artists have gone back to the old way art was intended--for success alone. Nobody knows what risks Botticelli took, or Leonardo da Vinci with his affiliation to the king of France. It's not new to take ~~changes~~ changes in art.

CHANCES

W. You did. What happened to the nice little boy from Port Arthur, Ernest Milton Rauschenberg? He was never predestined to become a famous artist.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I worked like hell. I sometimes make a joke about being from Port Arthur, Texas and how lousy my life was there except for the fact that both my parents loved me. Once I was drafted into the Navy, Port Arthur was not a place to come back to. I'd seen too much of the outside world.

Q. After art school in Kansas City, you became really serious about art, and went to Paris, then to Joseph Albers at Black Mountain College and finally to New York. What were the best parts of this education?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Only the ones that kept me moving. I went to Kansas City Art Institute, which was my first academic art training, because I had a girlfriend who encouraged me to be an artist because I kept drawing all the time. So I had four jobs in Kansas City, plus going to night school, in order to get to Paris.

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(more)

I didn't realize that I was twenty or twenty-five years too late. I mean, it was all over by then. Everybody was doing psychological interpretations of what Leger really meant, or what Picasso really meant. I had the common sense to realize that when the trees of the masters are so big there must be a lot of shade, and only mushrooms or moss can grow under those giants.

Q. Was it because you were disillusioned with Paris that you went to Joseph Albers?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes. What happened was that I went out on the streets, and started painting. I didn't have that many pairs of jeans, and they were all covered with paint because I wouldn't use a brush. I was so interested in the tactile techniques.

Q. You did it with your fingers.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: My fingers were touching the paint, touching the canvas. I didn't want anything between me and the canvas. I knew that I didn't want to be the kind of artist who would continue doing that kind of work. That is the adolescence of a serious artist, and I wanted to grow up.

So then I went to Albers for discipline, and I certainly got it. I got discipline, intimidation, insults and you know...the process is still going on, I think.

One of the paintings I have just finished in the studio is for the anniversary of Annie Albers. It's a contribution to a traveling show in Germany celebrating Annie's eightieth or ninetieth birthday.

Q. That's great. Then you went to New York.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I went to New York after Black Mountain because I felt too confined, living by a manufactured lake, made for a bible school and set up by the Driers, who are Duchamp's big collectors and responsible for bringing a lot of the Bauhaus people over to escape Hitler. You know it is a common fact that Hitler wanted to get rid of the artists before he tried to get rid of the Jews.

So, it was time to move. I was married and had a son and I thought I should try it in New York. Not try it by going from gallery jto gallery, but just by studying and being exposed in a big city. The chronology is a bit confused because of my dyslexia, which gives one a poor sense of time.

Q. Later you worked with John Cage and met Marcel Duchamp. How did he inspire you?

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ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Only by hearsay. When I met Marcel Duchamp I didn't challenge him on aesthetics, but he came to one of the first shows I had in New York. I had a box, filled with nails and four rocks. It was called Music Box. You were supposed to pick it up and rattle it and listen to all the chimes that went on. I wasn't in the gallery, but he did that and he said: "I think I've heard this song before," which is a great compliment coming from Duchamp.

Q. Art history always takes account of famous people, including Robert Rauschenberg. You are seen as a turning point in American art.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: ~~Can~~^{Could} it turn in any direction?

Q. You turned it in a certain direction.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think so.

Q. How would you describe that direction?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I hate to say anything negative about the abstract expressionists, but there was a kind of self-pity in them that somehow disagreed with my euphoric optimism. I wasn't jealous. If somebody bought a painting of theirs, and I couldn't even give mine away it didn't mean that they weren't going to buy a painting of mine. They were the best that America had to offer. It was the real team, like Rothko, who were always depressed. I mean, his suicide was not a surprise to anybody. With the abstract expressionists suicide fitted perfectly into the depression of the starving, struggling artist, even if he was already making hundreds of thousands of dollars.

I had conversations, at the Cedar Bar in New York, with Bill de Kooning, who came from Holland. I asked, "How do you feel about all these people just from the street painting de Koonings?" And he said, "They can't do the bad ones."

Q. You yourself became famous very fast. By 1955 you were felt to be a very influential artist. But you did not want your fame or your money to interfere with your motivation.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I didn't have any money.

Q. You do now, and you still have a very specific motivation as an artist. Could you describe your motivation?

(more)

*note - 1964,
not 1955*

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I guess, my first break was ~~when~~^{when} I was traveling with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1964. We just happened to be in Venice during the Biennale. I ~~was~~ in the Biennale in a group show put up by Alan Solomon. I didn't know how serious this was. But I remember that they were shuffling my paintings from place to place in barges and trucks, because the rumor was out that I was going to be the first American to win the big prize. I was in the American consul, trying to convince Kenneth Noland he had nothing to worry about, because his ^(a) paintings were much better than mine. Then we found out I had won.

Q. A great story. Over the last few years contemporary visual art has become very popular and people queue for museums. Are visual things becoming more important in our global culture?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think what's happening is that the success of art works, at auctions and so forth, has been not exaggerated, but the response of the audience has been exaggerated with a view to investments. I wouldn't be the one to say that they were wrong, but I think that I myself cannot charge the prices that a good stockbroker can put on my works. ~~That~~ ^{THAT} really doesn't bother me. I'm old enough now to know that I ~~was~~ happily poor, creatively poor, and more money wouldn't change that. Involvement is important in creativity, in which everything is priceless.

Q. ~~What~~ kind of value do we put on visual things compared with words?'

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Actually I'm not qualified to answer that question because I have dyslexia to an extreme degree. I can write well, but I can't read well. Probably the reason that I'm, excuse me, an outstanding artist is because I can't read. everything to me is visual.

Q. Do you believe that art can change the world?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes I do, absolutely, that's what ROI is all about. That is what I meant earlier when I said that art is communication. When you are confronted head on with people who have different languages, then video, photographs and images within paintings are a response to the various cultures--one that needs no translations--and therefore reduces the possibility of misunderstandings.

When I was in China there was no way any of those people could know what Mexicans are like. They didn't know what they ate, what their religion was. They couldn't travel fifteen kilometers to visit their mother without five party members agreeing.

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RR INTERVIEW
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I had the idea for ROCI international at least five years before, partly because I felt so sorry for the Chinese, who couldn't get to see their families fifteen kilometers away. ROCI is about communicating peace through art. People who know each other cannot sustain consistent animosity toward each other. If you know what somebody else is doing and what they are thinking, then there is room for trust. If you don't then there's always suspicion and fear. Politicians get re-elected by terrifying different groups of people about other groups of people.

It is the confusion, of politicians, who manufacture their jobs and get the people's consent by the people's disagreements. So everybody keeps trying to manufacture peace without the energy or the finances with which they wage war. ROCI has cost me three million dollars so far. I had to sell some great Twomblys and some great Warhols. Nearly all the masterpieces of my collection are gone. I'm paying for ROCI out of my pocket. That's all right with me, because I want the world to continue and I would rather it continues just a little more peacefully than it is now.

With ROCI we go to trouble spots. When we were in Chile they were shooting while we were hanging our pieces, and we had two earthquakes. (*Note: since this interview, Pinochet has been ousted.) In Tibet it was the first time that art for art's sake had been shown. Venezuela flew their air force to Chile to pick up the art works for the ROCI show in Caracas. I thought then that if the military could just stop all this crap and have art around all over the place, then there would be no time for war, because there would not be enough petrol. Cuba sent ships to Japan to pick up the show...a poor country like Cuba sent ships to Japan. That really is fantastic.

So we take ROCI to countries that are basically sensitive areas. We don't go to Paris or West Berlin. We did try a simultaneous show between East Berlin and West Berlin, but East Berlin refused it. They finally agreed that we could show in West Berlin, but West Berlin was going to pay for the exhibition in East Berlin, so I said "No, we have to have a clean record, and we're not going to indulge them. (*Note: After this interview, within two days of the Berlin wall opening, ROCI made arrangements to show in East Berlin and opened March 9, 1990 for a four-week exhibition in the Altes Museum.)

(more)

Q. You have claimed that artists could really be the negotiators for peace.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I believe that very strongly because everybody else negotiating for peace is elected and therefor has to make certain compromises.

Q. If we take that thinking a stop further, we could maybe also say that if there were no artists to change our culture, science would come to a standstill.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Artists drag other parts of society into a confrontation with the unknown. Artists have always been the conscience of all forms of activity and thought. I think that in particular the artists are trying to destroy bourgeois caution.

As John Cage said, "The biggest fear that people feel threatened by is the fear of change." Artists bring change, because you cannot be creative and just duplicate or illustrate known facts. I was in Washington on a panel of celebrities and there was a voice from the audience: "How do you account for the fact that the National Endowment for the Arts is so much less than what's going on in Britain and in other countries?" I answered "We have had three Presidents in a row who cut the National Endowment. If we have one more President, then we won't have any art support."

Q. In 1970 you founded CHANGE, Inc. to help artists in need. Can you describe what CHANGE is doing at this moment?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: The same thing it has always been doing, and that is to provide emergency funds. No matter how you paint, or write or photograph, we will take you seriously. We don't require any kind of aesthetic description. I defend it by saying any lousy artist could be tomorrow's Picasso. That doesn't go over well. But anyway, we have an affiliation with five hospitals, which will accept art as payment for medical attention. It is a one-man socialist thing I guess. A single example was an artist who was going to have to have his leg amputated because he couldn't afford other treatment.

So, we just keep exchanging art for medical care. What you have here is the morale of the patients is improved, plus the artists get free service. It doesn't cost us anything. Lives are being spared. We work with poets, dancers, writers, painters, sculptors,

(more)

actors--they are all supported with treatment.

I tried to spin this across the country a bit. I took it out to Los Angeles. They couldn't deal with it because they got involved in the quality of the work, which is totally beside the point.

It could easily be nationwide. Although it's a bit like the trip to Kuala Lumpur that I'm taking now; everybody thinks I want to go to a boutique factory and see early wood carvings. What I really want to see are the people and the life.

I have applied for several grants. I almost got one when I was really struggling. I mean, one is always struggling, but somehow at certain points your muscles aren't strong enough to swim out of it. I never got one. I never asked twice.

I thought I had got a Guggenheim grant, when I applied for the Dante Project. I thought, "God, he's such an elegant guy, they can't turn him down." They they asked me to show them some original works. It's a true story. I know only two people who had works of mine that they had framed with gilt frames. And I thought, well, I'm up against it now, it's one of two people. Even the gilt frames didn't work. They loved the photographs, but when they saw the physicality of the work it was abusive to them.

Q. Were you disappointed or disillusioned?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Actually I would have been surprised if I had won. But I never applied for another grant. I know those forms that artists have to fill out. Like, how many languages do you speak? Where did you go to school? What degrees do you have? By the time you can qualify you don't need it. So CHANGE doesn't ask such questions.

Q. You once said that global thinking comes from caring.

RR: That is what I think.

Q. Moving on to another subject, I would like you to talk about science. For years you have been marrying art and science. In 1970 you founded Experiements in Art and Technology, EAT. What was the real idea behind that?

(more)

RR: The problem was that technologists had no concern with the morality of their contribution to the world. Okay, the Princess Telephone took fifteen years to develop. There must have been so many things other than a Princess Telephone that could have been developed. My whole artistic life has been a combination of remodeling politics and dealing with scientists, trying to make everything pull together--instead of art being some kind of elitist luxury for a few people who are at a financial or social advantage. If art were assumed to be a normal occupation, then the prejudices would disappear.

We tried to integrate poets, painters and sculptors with high technology, because usually by the time there is a new scientific piece of information it is being used for something as dumb as the Princess Telephone. Whereas this information put into the creative hands of artists could have changed the entire art world.

So we presented Experiments in Art and Technology as a theater piece called "Nine Evenings." In my piece alone, there were at least nine new inventions which were patented. We then got writers in to deal with the computers. Head management always said yes. The researchers were excited, but middle-management always was confused because they were intimidated by head-management. So it didn't last long.

Q. I like your example of the Princess Telephone, because it was the first telephone with a different shape. It was beautiful, people liked it.

RR: I know, but there were thousands of ideas that could have created so many different kinds of works if they had been shared by artists. That's what EAT was about, but it was an uphill battle. We established it. It worked, and then the art was discarded.

Q. You have always seen the spiritual content of materials. How would you describe the importance of the metaphysical, the transcendental content of art?

RR: I don't think you can separate them. The object of art is to not separate those things. You don't make an icon for either of them. You just indulge in the process of putting them together.

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I went to Tibet a few years ago. I have been picking up rags and abused and unused equipment for paintings since the 1950s. I like the experience. This is what I have in common with the Tibetans: I like the experience of the material.

Q. You recognize this.

RR: Somehow a bone or a piece of rag that has been run over by several trucks has another soul.

In Tibet this was difficult, because I felt just as Tibetan as the Tibetans. That was one of the most difficult exhibitions for me aesthetically to make, because I felt that the people who do the pilgrimages and who wait for the buses already have so much respect for every object, knowing that there is a religious content in a dog or a rag or a bone or a piece of hair. Most of my works deal with the natural history of materials.

Q. In many countries you see now that the institutionalized forms of religion fall apart.

RR: Yes, they fight.

Q. They fight and therefore they fall apart. Do you see a new spirituality emerging?

RR: I don't know. I was in Sri Lanka, which is certainly a good example of this. I had just come from Thailand and I saw what kind of aesthetic brutality and misunderstanding the Vietnam war had made there. I was not comfortable. We went to Sri Lanka and I met the sweetest, most open people, who had no complications that they were actually going to share with you. Several months later two religious factions, which weren't native to Sri Lanka, were bombing each other and killing innocent people.

Q. Let's move on to economics. Joseph Beuys talked about "spiritual economy." His spiritual economy was: If I care for you, others will care for me. Have you thought of an economic model yourself? What is your economic strategy?

RR: Never waste a thing. I think Joseph had the same idea. He may have used this in a more controlled conceptual idea. I never ~~say~~ anything that was wasted that shouldn't be used. ^{SAW}

(more)

RR INTERVIEW

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Q. Where does creativity come into the economy?

RR: I think waste has to be digested into a creative situation, in order for it to have any meaning whatsoever. You can't just advertise the fact that there is more than we need.

Q. Talking about the event in Amsterdam "Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy," John Cage suggested we find economists for this event who are in favor of unemployment, instead of employment. What would be your comment?

RR: Well, I think the homeless should have homes and the hungry should be fed. And the hypocrisy of most of the religions, including some parts of Islam, should change. I mean, I'm going to the coronation of a sultan tomorrow, and ~~he~~^{he} is one of the richest men in the world. I am going for the pageantry and for the photo-imagery and the video. If he said I give my multi-millions to feed the hungry that would be incredible. That's the problem with the Catholic church which keeps robbing the poor, because they have this biblical threat of give to ~~God~~^{God} or be damned in hell. Now, they haven't yet proven hell or heaven, and I'm not an atheist but I could be.

While they're robbing these poor people they could be selling some of their Rubens and real estate, and changing the entire economy of the poor people.

Q. Well, art is a tool, your art too.

RR: I know, but it is nothing like the Vatican. What ROCI is about is trying to bring enough information to make changes.

Q. You say the Vatican and others should have spent more money. If they sell something off, they can really be helpful. You certainly spend a lot of money with your own institutions. You brought compassion into your economy.

RR: That's true. I lost all my major art works, a very early Warhol. Well, I didn't lose it. It went out into the public. A 1951 Twombly, and what else?

Anyway I sold a lot of art work for premium prices so that actually I had more collaborators, some unwilling, who financed ROCI.

(more)

Q. You must have spent something like six million dollars.

RR: It's about half a million for each stop round the world.

Q. What do you imagine a compassionate society would be like?

RR: This (si) not a very simple question. I think the answer to a question like that is so complicated that philosophers and scientists and economists haven't been able to figure it out. I think maybe the obliteration of the concept of competition might do it. Competition is sort of physically the mainstay of economics.

Q. Isn't it about time then to bring the arts, science and spirituality together against ~~a~~the background of a changing economy?

RR: The economy is changing. The politics from any day's newspaper will prove that.

Q. In Amsterdam you will meet with a scientist, a spiritual thinker and an economist.

RR: Yes, I am terrified, but I'm looking forward to it. If life isn't scary, it's not worth living.

Q. What terrifies you?

RR: I don't know, the confrontation and whether I have enough information. As I told you I am dyslexic, so it is difficult for me to read. If I get thrown into a context that is historically intellectual as opposed to organically intellectual, then I sometimes get into difficulties.

But I think it is important to have the most powerful and determining aspects of life thrown together, even if only in a therapeutic situation, because in fact we should always be working together.

Q. What would you desire for the future of mankind?

RR: Stop destroying the world.

Q: And how could you contribute to it?

RR: I do it all the time.

Q. Thanks very much.

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