ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Christopher Rauschenberg

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Christopher Rauschenberg conducted by Mary Marshall Clark on January 13, 2015 and Clark and Cameron Vanderscoff on January 17, 2016. These interviews are part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center | Session #1

Interviewee: Christopher Rauschenberg | Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark | Date: January 13, 2015

Q: Today is January 13, 2015. Mary Marshall Clark with Christopher Rauschenberg. We're going to start at the very beginning this time because we lost a bit before. So I wanted to ask you to talk about how you became a photographer. And you gave me a wonderful sentence, which we almost lost, about empathy and photography. Could you repeat that?

Rauschenberg: Oh, well yes. I think photography has a very deep connection with empathy. I think that the phrase "to look at the world through somebody else's eyes" is a metaphoric description of both empathy and photography, and if you meet a lot of photographers, which I do in my business, they are noticeably more empathetic than the general public. There's a real, "Oh, you're coming to my city where I live? Well, you have to stay with me." And they're constantly trying to do stuff. You know, it makes sense. If you want to write something about Afghan culture with a word processor, you sit in your chair and make stuff up [laughs] based on your reading, but if you're a photographer you have to go there and you have to meet people and hang out with them [laughs]. It's just sort of built into the process that you're not operating from a remove. With a wide-angle lens, you can't be more than 3 feet away from whomever you're working with. That's something that has its philosophical implications as well as practical implications.

Q: And just because you are about to go to honor one photographer's work, tell us a little bit about what you're doing on Friday.

Rauschenberg: On Friday I'm going to Tanzania. There's a project that Wendy Ewald is doing there that my dad's foundation [Robert Rauschenberg Foundation] is a funder for. Working with educators there, she came up with a list of images or a sense of what images would be useful for them to have in their otherwise bare classroom that just has a blackboard in it, and then working with school kids in Tanzania they produced a set of ten posters on various themes, all the different tribes of Tanzania, cleanliness and politeness, and there's an alphabetical one about AIDS with ABCs. There are ten of them and they're done in an edition of forty thousand and distributed to every public school classroom in the country. And now she's going through and periodically going back and doing kind of curriculum workshops on how do you work with these posters and what kind of things do these make possible for you to do in your classroom. We're going to go and sit in on a couple of those workshops and travel around Tanzania and look at things and photograph things.

Wendy Ewald and Sebabtso looking at test shots.
Photo: © Pete Mauney

Q: Wonderful. Oh that's exciting. So today I wanted to ask you about your early life and your influences, and I'd like to start with your mother [Susan Weil]. I know you became a photographer and an artist really very early on.

Rauschenberg: Yes, my mother and father were both artists and I grew up being sort of hauled around to openings and things like that, and of course I was a big fan of [Jean] Tinguely and Marisol [Escobar]—they were my two favorite artists when I was a kid. Aside from my parents. [Laughs] When I was six, my mom let me take pictures with her big Rolleiflex twin-lens camera that weighed about as much as I did and caused me to take very blurry pictures of her and my grandfather and my uncle's dog and [laughs] whoever seemed like somebody that I cared about, which is the key to snapshots; snapshots are great because everyone's taking pictures of people and animals that they love. [Laughs] But anyway, she saw that I couldn't really take sharp pictures with it and she got me my own little box camera, a Brownie box camera. She and I would go out periodically, walking around in the city and taking pictures, and I took pictures pretty similar to what I take now actually.

Robert Rauschenberg
'topher and Sue, 1952
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Our apartment in New York was a railroad flat, which means an apartment where the rooms are in a line like railroad cars on a train and there are only windows at the two ends, at the engine and the caboose, if you want to continue the metaphor. So my room in the middle was the logical room to use if you needed it to be dark for something, such as for a darkroom. There was, if you know what a Murphy bed is, a bed that folds down out of the wall, there was sort of a Murphy darkroom in my room. There was this table that came down onto a couple of legs that flopped up against the wall when it wasn't up and there was a little enlarger in there that we would pull out and set up some trays. I always knew when my mom was going to do some photography because these big brown glass gallon jars would appear in the bathroom and I would know that was going to be a darkroom night, so then I would read under the covers with a flashlight and ask, "Hey, can I print too?"

She taught me how to print and I made my own enlargements and they were not the greatest prints. Ansel Adams wasn't jealous of me by any means. But I did them and I really enjoyed it and I took satisfaction in doing it. Two years in a row I made a photo portfolio of 8-by-10 prints that were mounted on boards and held together with binder rings, but not in a binder, and a piece of glass I wrote on with a magic marker, "Abstract Photography by Chris R." R was about as far as I was prepared to go on spelling my last name. That was then laid across the cover of the prints. That was written in white because it blocked the light coming down onto the paper. I made those for various people I was giving Christmas things to, my parents and grandparents.

So I really enjoyed doing that and when I was in high school, I felt like I wanted to do photography again. I was a very math and science-y kind of a kid, and photography is a very interesting art because it's a combination of art and science. It has its one foot firmly in art and aesthetics and seeing things beautifully, and one foot firmly in science. There's actually a question in Islam, you're not supposed to make images. But maybe photography is allowed because you're not making the image, you're just allowing the world to make an image of itself. [Laughs] The fact that you're allowing the world to make an image of itself is the science part of photography. If you think about a crime scene, they send in a photographer, they don't send in a poet or a dancer, because the camera will make an image with every detail. Things that you have no interest in and that don't seem important at all but may be important are all recorded equally and that kind of dispassionate recording of data [laughs] is an important part of science; analyzing it later is fine, but there's no point in analyzing it later if you haven't got it in the first place.

So anyway, I was interested in photography. When I was in college I took drawing too, but I was one of these people who, I'd make one line on the paper and say, "Oh, that looks so good I don't want to mess it up." With photography you don't worry about that, you just push the shutter once and it all happens all at once, you don't have to be worried about messing it up. But yes, in high school I started doing photography again and when I got to college I was a physics major, but I didn't really want to do that. I read *Cat's Cradle* [Kurt Vonnegut, 1963] and it was like am I going to be making ice-nine for the military? What am I going to be doing with this in life after I graduate as a physics major? There are actually very interesting things going on in physics now, more so even than when I was in school.

Q: Do you keep up with it?

Rauschenberg: A little bit. But for me, there was this sort of pull back to photography; it was something that really worked well with my personality, my interests, and my whole way of looking at things. So I started doing it in school very seriously and graduated as a photography major and have done photography ever since. My father is primarily known as a painter, whatever that means, but very early on, in the late forties and early fifties, he was doing very good photography. And my personal feeling, which is not something I've ever heard anybody but me say, is that his way of looking at the world was the way that a photographer looks at the world. If you look at one of his Combine paintings [1954–64], there's a necktie and here's something from the newspaper and here's a tire and here's a lampshade; there's that same notion that everything that's around you is equally art and is equally important to look at, even if your brain tells you, "That's not important, don't look at it."

Robert Rauschenberg
Rhyme, 1956
Combine: oil, fabric, necktie, paper, enamel, pencil, and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
48 1/4 x 41 1/8 inches (122.6 x 104.5 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York Fractional and promised gift of Agnes Gund in honor of Richard E. Oldenburg

A camera is not like a brain; a camera doesn't decide what's important, it thinks everything is important. And I think for me, his way of thinking about art had that camera view a little bit, that if you look at all the things that aren't interesting, they are interesting [laughs] and look at how they fit together. In a photograph it's not just whatever the subject matter is, it's the visual music of how the parts of the image relate to each other and echoing forms referencing each other. Here's a rabbit over here, but this guy over here looks a little rabbity too. [Laughs] Whatever it is, I'm making a silly example. And it's funny because I don't think my dad would ever describe himself as scientific, but I think there is an aspect of that—I think he saw himself as somewhat of a reporter as well as somebody who just creatively makes something artistic; that it was about looking out at the world and reporting what was there. He had the TV on all the time and he'd never change the channel; he wasn't really watching the programs other than the soap operas. But whatever channel the soap opera was on, it just stayed on that channel all day. And it was just like having a window that you see out into the world, except it was a window that saw not just what was literally on your block, it saw out into the larger world. So I think he was always interested in what was going on around and, as I say, did reporting on it.

Q: And at a certain point, was it in the late seventies, he started using his own photography as the basis of his artwork?

Rauschenberg: Yes. It's interesting. One of the things that I didn't think about until a few years ago, when Schirmer/Mosel did a book of my dad's early photographs [*Robert Rauschenberg: Photographs 1949–1962*, 2011]—there are early photographs and then he didn't really do a lot

of photography and then he picked it up again in the seventies. But looking at the early photographs, they were very much photographs of people he loved and things that were around him and pictures in his studio and things in the world that looked like his paintings. But they didn't have that aspect of being a reporter of the whole world; they had this aspect of being his own life and his people and everything. When I noticed that in the book, then I thought back and I went, yes, his Combine paintings are full of pictures of Dora [Rauschenberg née Dora Carolina Matson] and Janet [Begneaud née Rauschenberg] being the Yambilee Queen, and my mom and I. And in the early work there's a real sort of looking in.

[Thaddeus] John Szarkowski was curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA, New York] for many years and probably most photographers—well a majority of photographers perhaps—would say that he's the most important curator in the photography field and he's now deceased. But he did a book that was called *Mirrors and Windows*[*: American Photography Since 1960*, 1978] and it was about dividing photography up into people whose photography was about looking in and people whose photography was about looking out at the outside world. For me well, my dad went from being a mirrors artist to being a windows artist [laughs] from looking in to looking out and I thought that was really interesting.

Q: Fascinating. Can we go back in time a little bit?

Rauschenberg: Sure, yes.

Q: Beautiful. You're making me so excited about photography. I want to take one of your courses.

Rauschenberg: I like photography.

Q: Yes, we can keep talking about it. So take me back to your earliest memories. Your mother described you, with you there in the room, as very precocious. She said you would mutter along in the crib but you wouldn't say words until you had them perfectly.

Rauschenberg: Yes, that's sort of my personality. When I was little, I didn't talk and I was banging my head, and my mom actually got me a punching bag. But then I started speaking in complete, full sentences and I wasn't banging my head anymore. It was like I wasn't prepared to do something, sort of work up into it [laughs] from a beginner to an accomplished level. I think we all kind of arrive from the factory with various hard-wired programming [laughs] and that's kind of my way. It's hard for me to just start in on something and do it badly. I'm very reluctant to do that.

I had a friend who was a photographer when I was in school who just would plunge into things. When he was learning how to kayak, he drove the teacher crazy because he was constantly flipping upside down and didn't know what he was doing, but it didn't matter, he was plunging into it. And my dad was kind of that way with languages. He wanted to talk to people and if he only knew three words of whatever language you spoke, well he was going to use them. [Laughs] And we'll talk and whenever I don't know your word I'll speak in English and we'll

kind of throw it together. It was just like he had no fear at all of plunging into something that he didn't know how to do and of course he ended up doing all these things that nobody ever did before, working in dance and in all kinds of crazy things. He had to come up with a name for Combines because he was worried that people were freaking out because they couldn't tell if it was painting or sculpture. So Bob had to make up a word to scare them off, inspired by [Alexander] Calder's similar problem, to which Calder said, "Oh, these are mobiles." And so oh, okay, Bob said, "Well, I can do that too. They're Combines," which is fun because it means farm machines as well as combinations. He was very interested in language and wordplay.

But yes, so as a kid I was very interested in my own sense of, I don't know—I don't know what to say really. My mom and I were very close. We were basically a two-person household and we did stuff all the time together. She did this thing with me, we had the C.S. Rauschenberg Company, Chris and Susan Rauschenberg Company, and I would dictate these letters to her to go off to various kinds of companies about, "Children do not like to have lumps of pork in their beans and you need to know this, it's very important for you. Should this information prove valuable, why don't you send me five hundred cans of pork and beans without the pork?" [Laughs] I would dictate these letters and she would type them up and we'd make sort of illustrations with them and stuff. Later I found out that she didn't actually mail them in, which was why I never got my five hundred cans of beans and everything.

But we were very close and we did a lot of things together. My dad was not living with us; they got divorced when I was a baby. But I used to see him all the time, in the sort of classic weekend [laughs] hang out for a day and all that stuff. And we had a great relationship and when I got a

little bit older and I was moving around the city on the subway on my own—when I was in ninth grade we moved from East Eighty-seventh Street between First and York [Avenues] down to Chinatown, so that he was on my way home and from that point on I would often just stop off. It's walking distance from my dad's house to my mom's house. I walked that yesterday. I would've walked it today except I took a cab with my mom, but I walked that round-trip yesterday, both ways; I'm going to walk home from here when we're through now. So I would just get off the subway and come and hang out a little bit and then head home to do my homework including one night when he said, "Oh, you should stay for dinner. [Henri] Cartier-Bresson is coming over." I said, "Oh no, I have homework to do." The moral of the story is, never do your homework.

So we had a very nice and easy relationship. It was not like being a live-in parent. There's a special relationship that you have with people who love you but don't have to tell you to brush your teeth. [Laughs] For most people your grandparents have this sort of special role. And to be a noncustodial parent sort of gives you access to that role as well. And I had my mother's parents, my maternal grandparents, I would see a lot because they were here. Bob's parents I didn't see very much; they were in the South, they were far away. I would see Dora a lot at openings and stuff, but Ernest [Rauschenberg] I didn't see very many times in my life really because we didn't go down there that much and he didn't come to Bob's things; he was hunting and fishing and so I didn't see him too much. But my mother's father was somebody both my mother and I wanted to be when we grew up.

Q: How come?

Rauschenberg: Well, he was really sweet. It's funny that we wanted to be him because he was really sort of a failed artist. He wanted to be a writer and he just didn't have any success with it. And his wife, my grandmother, she was a writer too, but she was of an era where you couldn't be more successful than your husband so she was sort of hamstrung by his lack of success. But he was a very sweet person and when we were living uptown in Yorkville on Eighty-seventh Street, which is the German neighborhood in New York, whenever I would see him he always wore a suit jacket and he would reach into his jacket pocket and he would pull out this strange candy bar, which was called a [Griesson-] de Beukelaer bar. It was sort of layers, like a Twix or something, chocolate and cookie layers. But of course what it meant was, "I'm thinking about you and I have something that's special for you and I have it in my pocket all the time." It was like, "I have you in my heart all the time." When I was a kid, one year for Christmas he gave me a store display box of twenty-four de Beukelaer bars and I just kept it on the shelf. My mom was like, "Well, aren't you going to eat those?" I was like, "Well, maybe." [Laughs] It was just, there's some symbolic meaning here. Even as a kid I knew what that was about.

Anyway my mom and I did stuff together, we were really very happy. Then when I was seven, my mom came and said well, [Bernard E.] Bernie Kirschenbaum, whom she had hired to build her a geodesic dome house in Stony Creek, Connecticut, where my grandparents had their house, that they were thinking of getting married but that they wouldn't get married unless it was okay with me. But they also gave me a *Mad* magazine so they kind of buttered me up a little.

Q: You mean a subscription or just one magazine?

Rauschenberg: No, just one issue. I was pretty little. This was second grade. [Laughs] But I said, "Yes, that's okay. We can marry Bernie." And that was good.

Q: That's a big change though, from being a two-person family.

Rauschenberg: A big change, yes. And then a year later, my sister was born [Sara Kirschenbaum] and we went from being a two-person family to a four-person family. But no, it was good. As a kid I had a set of plastic dinosaurs, which of course now they've all changed, "Oh no, that bone didn't actually go there," you know. And all my information is out of date, but I was very interested in that. I was always trying to get my mom to tell me what her favorite dinosaur was and her favorite dinosaur was Ankylosaurus because she could remember the name of it, because it had this shell, it sort of looked like it had a whole bunch of ankles on it. So that was her favorite.

Q: Were you a frequent visitor to the American Museum of Natural History [New York]?

Rauschenberg: Yes, I used to go to the Museum of Natural History every week. My mom would drop me off for the planetarium show. Up until John [Herschel] Glenn [Jr.]'s three orbits of earth, they would just make up a new planetarium show every week. The guy who was in charge of it would just say, "Today we're going to think about, what does the sky look like from Mars?" [Laughs] And so suddenly the Martian surface, as much as they could surmise of it, was around. I really loved wandering around the Museum of Natural History and all the stuffed animal

dioramas I thought were fascinating. I was a little alarmed, they had one that appeared to be a stuffed human being; it was a hunter and that was a little alarming to me as a kid. It was like did that guy volunteer for that job? [Laughs] But it actually wasn't a stuffed human being, although at the [National] Museum of the American Indian [New York] they used to have a shrunken man. Apparently that's no longer available for viewing.

Q: And then there was the *Bodies* exhibit a few years ago.

Rauschenberg: Yes, but luckily that wasn't around when I was a kid. I don't know what I would've made of that. But yes, I used to do the museum every week, I used to watch TV a lot of course, and living on Eighty-seventh Street, Eighty-sixth Street used to have five movie theaters on it. I don't think it does anymore. But there was a little stretch of about three blocks of Eighty-sixth Street with five movie theaters. My mom would drop me off on Saturday and they would show an hour and a half of cartoons and then the regular movie. So I would watch an hour and a half of cartoons and then whatever the regular movie was, whether it was Brigitte Bardot or *The Blob* [1958], which of course gave me nightmares for about a year. [Laughs]

Q: I remember that. I'm about your age. I would've forgotten that forever if you hadn't mentioned it.

Rauschenberg: But anyway I had this very rich growing-up in New York City. It's funny, there was this whole sort of postwar thing of "move to the suburbs so the kids have it better" thing. They were just fleeing black people. But there's nothing to flee about black people; black people

are lovely. [Laughs] So they were just making a mistake. And growing up in the city was really so culturally wonderful. I was into comic books a lot and there was a used comic book store within a block of my house. I got a *Detective Comics* that still had detective stories in it. *Detective Comics* was what Batman used to be in and it didn't have detectives for very long; Batman kind of took over. But I really loved having so much stuff to do. When we would go out to Stony Creek, Connecticut, to stay in the dome on weekends in the summer, the kids out there had nothing to do. And for somebody who only knows the world in this Internet age, if you lived there, there were three channels of TV, that was it, that was the total of entertainment options for you. There was no movie theater in Stony Creek, there was no Internet to look at things on. There was a library you could get books out of. There weren't even videotape movies. You just had whatever little there was and what was on the three channels of TV was lousy. So when [Edward Vincent] Ed Sullivan came on and everybody in the country watched, it wasn't just because he was a great genius, it was because there was nothing else to do in the whole country. [Laughs]

Q: Tell me about it. I grew up in North Carolina.

Rauschenberg: Okay, yes, there you go. Growing up in New York, it wasn't like that. There was tons of stuff to do. Like I said, they were always taking me around to art openings and I loved—Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup [*Object*, 1936] was my favorite thing at MoMA. And my aesthetic sense of what kind of art I like I think is also related to this kind of math background. In movies and in cartoons mostly, when you see mathematicians you'll see three blackboards with some formula that's three blackboards full, ten thousand numbers and letters and Greek letters

and all this stuff, equations. That's not beautiful to a mathematician. That's like, "Oh no, that's wrong." I don't know what it says, but it's wrong. When you really get down to the heart of something, it's $e=mc^2$ or $\pi \bullet d$. [Laughs] Circumference is pi times the diameter. There's an aesthetic to feeling like you want to reduce something to its simplest form. You say something's half an inch, you don't say it's 16/32 of an inch. That's not pleasing, to say 16/32; it's pleasing to say a half.

Meret Oppenheim
Object, 1936
Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon
Cup 4 3/8 inches (10.9 cm) diameter; saucer 9 3/8 inches (23.7 cm) diameter; spoon 8 inches (20.2 cm) long, overall height 2 7/8 inches (7.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

So my aesthetic with artwork was to have something that was this really simple conjunction that was very powerful, like the fur-lined teacup, or there was a Tinguely piece that I loved that was like—there used to be these bead curtains that people would hang in doorways, and it was a bead curtain like that and a welcome mat. And when you stood on the welcome mat, the curtain sort of hula'd back and forth; the bar that it was on just went side to side. [Note: Tinguely's *La Jalousie I* (1960) and *La Jalousie II* (1961) are two versions of the bead curtain work.] It was this completely simple thing and it was making this hula right in front of you and it was beautiful. It was this great thing and part of what was so beautiful about it was that it was this completely simple thing. And Tinguely made these drawing machines that you would put a Magic Marker in—and Magic Markers at the time were this sort of salt shaker with a tube sticking out the top of it, this very funny-looking thing—but you'd put this Magic Marker into it and you'd put a

quarter in it and this arm would jerk this Magic Marker around and make a drawing, a sort of rattly, wonderful drawing [*Métamatics*, 1955–59]. I still have an all-yellow one, which was a little too pure probably, but I still have it; I saw it in my drawer the other day.

Jean Tinguely
Méta-matic N° 1, 1959
Metal, paper, felt-tip pen, motor
37 3/4 x 33 1/2 x 17 3/8 inches (96 x 85 x 44 cm)
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Photo: © Philippe Migeat - Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI /Dist. RMN-GP © Adagp, Paris

Jean Tinguely
La Jalousie II [*Blind Jealousy II*], 1961
Painted bead curtain, metal rod, and electric motor
85 5/8 x 36 x 14 inches (217.5 x 91.5 x 35.5 cm)
National Galleries Scotland

So for me, I was always less interested in baroque, Byzantine complication, and I found drawing to be magical in the sense that you make a simple line and one side of it becomes somebody's head and the other side becomes empty space. I wasn't interested in the kind of drawing that was like a whole bunch of squiggly, scratchy— I like the magic of a line being so well observed that you could tell not only that it was a nose, but whose nose it was and whether they had a cold. [Laughs] So anyway that was always my mathematician reducto aesthetic.

Q: How does that feed into and how did it feed into your own expressivity with your photographs?

Rauschenberg: Well, I think it connects pretty directly. I'm of a vintage, coming of age as a photographer in the early seventies; it's when everybody started using wide-angle lenses. The generation of photographers before that basically all went to college on the GI Bill, like my dad did, and came out and then were the teachers for the colleges starting to have photography programs, which they didn't really have before that. When I went to Reed [College, Portland, Oregon], there was no photography class. That older generation of photographers shot a lot with telephoto lenses and it was part of the whole aesthetic of you take a picture and then you crop it to the right cropping. But if you're shooting with a wide-angle lens, you can't really post-visualize; you can't change the picture later really because the main way that you change how things fit in the frame is by moving an inch to the left for something that you're 2 feet away from. If you're shooting with a telephoto lens and you're taking a picture of something that's two blocks away, moving an inch to the left has no effect whatsoever on the composition. So it's fine to go back later and decide actually the edge should be over here.

Q: I get it; it's great.

Rauschenberg: Yes, if you're 3 inches away, you'd better know where you should be exactly, right now. [Laughs] So basically nobody really cropped anything in my cohort of photographers. And there was an aesthetic to file out your negative card a little bigger so it would show the clear edge of the film a little bit and put a black line around the picture, just kind of saying I'm

showing you the whole thing. This isn't a cropping. That aesthetic and that meaning are gone now. They did a show at the Portland Art Museum [Oregon] that closed two days ago that was a thirty-nine-plus-year history of the shows that we've had at the photography gallery that I cofounded, Blue Sky gallery [Portland, Oregon]. The photography curator matted everything, covering up the black borders, and printed them in the catalogue with no black borders [laughs] and it's like that has lost the meaning that it had. But it also gave you a chance to have a print that wasn't in a mat, that was just a piece of paper with white around it and to not worry if there's some white in the image that does bleed off into the paper. If you take a picture with the sky and the sky is all white, there has to be something holding it in, otherwise your image just becomes blank page; it isn't sky anymore, it's just paper, it's border. [Laughs] Anyway so that's all kind of a different time.

But I think in the seventies, when I was starting to do photography, there was a real sense of excitement about it, that it was a medium that not only was it the only thing that people could think of that seemed to be strong enough to help stop the Vietnam War, which was something that everybody was very concerned with, that I knew. So it felt like something that was powerful and yet you could also take a picture of a paperclip with it. That somehow the political power and the pure poetry of it combined into being this sort of fascinating thing.

And if you think about all of this, the moment in the seventies was about how can you look at things differently than they've been looked at and building on the beatniks and all that. It was really a time of saying, okay, here's how everybody has looked at and thought about things up until now. Screw all that. What's a new way to think about everything? And that's really what

photography is, it's sort of saying that if you had ten different people photograph the same place, you get ten different places. [Laughs] That's basically what we wanted to do, we wanted to say okay, here we are in the same place. How can we have it be a different place? How can we have it be a place where you don't care if people are black, you don't care if people are gay, you don't care if people have a lot of money or not? You don't care if your clothes are fancy. All these things that people cared about, we didn't want to care about them. And all these things that people didn't care about, like is your food made out of dead animals, we wanted to care about that. [Laughs] So it was really kind of stepping in and reexamining everything.

Q: What led you to apply to Reed in the first place?

Rauschenberg: Well, Reed had a very strong reputation and I didn't go visit it; I went with my dad, I went to a show that he was having at the Fort Worth Art Museum [Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas] and then he was headed out to Gemini [G.E.L., Los Angeles] to make some prints. So I went with him to that and we went to Gemini and I looked at some schools in California with him. We went to CalTech [California Institute of Technology, Pasadena] and I didn't want to go there because they proudly told me that their social events were organized by the Y. I was like I'm sorry, I'm from New York. I go every weekend to the Fillmore East. That's not going to work for me. [Laughs]

It was interesting, it was really interesting actually, going around with my dad to those places because at that point he was a very well-known artist and so every physics department we went to, they would be trying to explain to him how art and science are really very similar. I would

think to myself, I don't think so. [Laughs] But of course they are, in this very profound way. Which is that the way an artist tries to understand the world is by making a metaphor, which is a smaller, simplified version of things that you manipulate to understand how the larger one works. Let me get it down to a scale where I can manipulate it and understand it. And that's how scientists understand the world too. They call it a scientific model, you call it a metaphor, but it's the same way of trying to understand things.

So ultimately I decided they were right. At the time I thought they were full of it. I think Reed had its own nuclear reactor; it was a very good physics program. And yet even though it was a strong science program, not only were they not telling me that their social events were organized by the Y, but you look in the catalogue and there are people with long hair who look like me, they look like the people I like [laughs] and in fact my wife [Janet Stein] and my closest friends are all my Reed buddies.

I went to Reed for two years and then I wasn't going to go to Reed any more than that. Reed had the reputation for being progressive and one of the ways that it was progressive was that it was really run by the faculty. And at that particular moment a majority of the faculty were fairly conservative, educationally. So Reed had this reputation for being progressive educationally; here were all these people who want to have a robust, exploratory experience of what education is, what can it be and what can it mean and all that; and Kent State [University, Ohio] and all this kind of crazy stuff. And there were tons of rules. Basically freshmen are not allowed to take literature. Everybody has to take a course and a half on the ancient Greeks and it was an ancient Greek core curriculum kind of a thing. I won't say everybody, but a lot of people felt corseted by

that. [Laughs] It wasn't a generation that wanted to wear corsets, let's just say. These were the bra-burning people, if they had one.

So what happened is Evergreen State College opened up in Olympia, Washington, in 1971. I went to Reed from 1969 to '71. And then I wasn't sure what I was going to do next. I actually got an application sent to me from Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Clown College. I was thinking about it. My dad sort of was interested in that because he was in Florida and that was in [Venice] Florida.

Q: I have a friend who went to that.

Rauschenberg: So anyway, I didn't apply there; I went up to Evergreen. At that point in my Reed life I was a psych major, which about forty percent of the school was because it was the most lively, interesting department. My favorite professor in the psych department, Professor [Allen] Neuringer, said, "You should look into Evergreen State College. There's something really interesting happening up there and a lot of people are looking at it." There was actually this huge transplant from Reed to Evergreen basically. It was like rats deserting a sinking ship except Reed didn't sink, it's still there and I think it's actually nice and lively there now too. But a whole bunch of faculty and students went up to Evergreen. My photography professor at Evergreen actually had been my humanities professor at Reed. [Laughs]

So I went there and I don't regret it for a minute. I got such a wealth of great friends and it's nice to lay down sort of a basic learning. Then when I got to Evergreen, their attitude was, "Well,

what are you trying to do? How can we help you? You're driving this car; where are you going?" And that's not a normal question that you get asked. In my life as a student, nobody had ever asked me before. They might say, "What's your major?" but that's not like—

Q: Why are you here?

Rauschenberg: You describe that as a track. And what's the difference between a track and driving a car? A track means you can't turn to the left or right. [Laughs] You can maybe go faster, you can maybe go slower, but you're going on a track. And Evergreen was not on a track. You were off-road. And that was a big difference. Our best friends, we're actually going to Tanzania with them, they went up from Reed to Evergreen with us and they were in a course called environmental design. When you start a college, you have to buy all the land you're ever going to need because once there's a college there you can't afford anything. [Laughs] You ruin the property values by making them too high. Gentrify the woods. So they bought this huge bunch of property and there was an old farm on it and on the master plan it was eventually going to be a parking lot. Our friends just went and said, "You don't need a parking lot. You need a farm." So they got college credit; their course was to go and convince the school to change the plan from a parking lot to a farm, turn it into a farm, pull all the stumps, rebuild the farmhouse. They got a cow donated. And if you go to Evergreen now, it's a big part of the school curriculum; they're very proud of their farm. They had me teach an alumni course. They have these alumni one-day seminar kind of things and they had me teach one, along with another person who was Evergreen faculty. And as a thank you, they gave me some stuff from the farm. [Laughs] That's their signature.

So I was really happy with that and basically the structure at Evergreen is that you're taking one class and however many disciplines it involves is fine. So there were students there who were doing boat building. What do you need for boat building? You need math, you need to understand the physics of it, there's all this stuff that's involved in it. You need a certain amount of—if you're building a big boat, you need some sociology, how is this going to work? Anyway, so for me it was the perfect place and I think it's a great school. Reed and Evergreen are usually on, when you get one of these publications that says, "Best Colleges in America," they're usually both pretty high on the list.

Q: So you got the two best.

Rauschenberg: Well, yes. One worked for me better than the other. [Laughs]

Q: Sounds a little bit like Black Mountain [College, North Carolina] in some ways.

Rauschenberg: Well that's funny, because I think Bob said to me at one point that it seemed kind of like Black Mountain. There was that liveliness of, let's all be interested in all disciplines.

Q: And so you were taking photography?

Rauschenberg: I did photography and film, and then film was just too expensive and I couldn't get anything done. And video, if you look at videos from the early seventies, you will understand

that video was not acceptable if you were coming from a photography place and you were used to being able to make a beautiful print; to make this weird, yucky-looking gray video where nothing was sharp was not appealing. But film was just too expensive. Now, my still camera is a camera that people use to make feature movies that go into movie theaters. [Laughs]

Q: It's just amazing how much has transformed. Just amazing.

Rauschenberg: Yes, it's a different world. If I was a young person in college now, I probably would do film actually. Well, I say that. I don't know. I do like photography a lot.

Q: You seem like a natural-born photographer to me. Would you mind if I take you on another memory tour?

Rauschenberg: Please.

Q: Okay. Lovely. I wanted to ask you, it's hard to characterize a parent's influence and I'm interested in both of your parents. Just thinking back to going to visit on the weekends, going to visit Bob and being at the studio. Did you spend much time with him in the studio and what were some of the images and projects he was working on that you were interested in?

Rauschenberg: When I was really little and he was doing stuff with me for the day, the things he was doing with me for the day were not going in the studio and painting. But yes, his studio that was on Broadway, above the billiards place, was a great big loft and I remember I learned to

roller-skate there. I found some roller skates, probably leftover from *Pelican* [1963], and that was my first time roller-skating around. I remember at that studio, hanging around and kind of watching him paint and stuff. And it was nice, all of his places that he lived, that I remember, and I don't remember the Fulton Street and all that because I was a baby, but from the time when I can remember, they all had this, let me just say, sort of lack of a living room. [Laughs] There was a kitchen and that's where you sat if you wanted to do something. And then there was just a big open space and that was—was that a studio? If he didn't have a studio somewhere else, yes. But later in his life, when he had a separate studio, it was still just a big empty space. The third floor here, in 381 Lafayette [Street], is typical of that. Everybody hung out in this little tiny kitchen. That's it, it doesn't matter how many thousands of square feet the building is, we're going to be in the twenty square feet that's the kitchen.

Rauschenberg in the kitchen of his Lafayette Street home and studio, New York, 1968.
Photo: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust

His first building in Captiva [Florida] just was a kitchen counter; everybody sat around the kitchen counter. It's this tiny little kitchen that was maybe 5-foot by 9-foot with a little eventually tiled place where two people could sit on one side. [Laughs] And that's where everybody was. There was a beanbag chair right next to that in the corner and the rest of the

room was just empty; there was no furniture in it. He never had furniture. It was all just kitchen counter.

And then his place that he moved in after that, where he lived after that in Captiva, the next spot on the beach, they built that house so it's the same way. The kitchen was a little bit bigger, the counter was much bigger and there were stools at the counter and that's it. In that one there was a sofa down at the other end, which basically nobody ever sat in. And there were walls to hang paintings on. And there were paintings on those.

Q: It's very Southern, in a way.

Rauschenberg: Well, he was a Southern boy.

Q: Yes. Was he always surrounded by people then? In conversation with people?

Rauschenberg: Yes. The thing about Bob was that he had sort of an Olympic-level curiosity. [Laughs] He was driven by curiosity in his artwork, but also in his interpersonal relations. If he were having a show in a museum somewhere, I would often be there when he would come to look at it and they would say, "Is this okay?" He was never interested in what the museum director had to say. He knew what the museum director had to say. He was interested in, what does the cleaning lady have to say, what does the museum guard have to say? They're going to say something that could be surprising. They're going to say something that the museum director would never say, even if he thought it, and he wouldn't think it because he would be so trained

into looking at everything from exactly the same little peephole. To talk to somebody who's looking at something from a direction that you're going to be excited to discover, from hearing how it looks through their peephole, you can reconstruct what direction they're looking at it from and get a sense of, what else am I saying.

One of the things when I was a kid that really I couldn't understand was— I always understood when I was a kid that the art was not a coded message. All these critics and reviewers were always deciphering this coded message and this is what this painting means. I'm a little kid and I know it doesn't mean something like that. It's about how do these things relate, if it's coded messages, it's a million coded messages at once. [Laughs] What the work is, the work is a whole series of conversations between the work and whoever happens to be standing in front of it at the moment. The work is not—by itself, if you're not looking at it, it's not done. It's not an artwork. It's when you're looking at it that you complete it.

Q: I remember the first time I saw your father's work in the Metropolitan [Museum of Art, "the Met," New York], a show of the Combines, and I felt that way [*Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, 2005–06]. I felt like the work was inviting me to go right up to it and stand in front of it, and it wanted to communicate with me.

Rauschenberg: Yes and he has a number of pieces that demand that. There's a piece *Soundings* [1968], that's now in Cologne, Germany [Museum Ludwig]. It's just a big mirror. If you don't make any noise, it's just a big mirror. But [laughs] it's not just a big mirror. There are all these chair images inside it that are illuminated by sound cues from you. So if you just quietly walk in,

look at it, and walk out again, you don't see a thing of it. And there's a piece that spins around when you make noise [*Dry Cell*, 1963]. He's not making a secret of the fact that you are supposed to interact with this.

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
Ludwig Donation

Robert Rauschenberg
Dry Cell, 1963
Silkscreen ink and oil on Plexiglas, with metal coat hanger, wire, string, sound transmitter, circuit board, and battery-powered motor on metal folding camp stool
15 x 12 x 15 3/8 inches (38.1 x 30.5 x 39.1 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Another thing I remember from when I was a kid was going to a Mark di Suvero show at MoMA and we knew Mark di Suvero who made these sculptures and here's this show of Mark di Suvero and each sculpture has a rubber mallet hanging off it. And you're supposed to bang on it! [Laughs] Of course they did not allow you to bang on the sculpture with this rubber mallet. There's actually a Mark di Suvero at the Portland Art Museum and the Portland Art Museum doesn't have a huge number of guards—maybe I shouldn't put this on record—but you're not supposed to touch anything. But when I go by, it's usually swinging. Somebody has got it going. And that's good because it's supposed to be swinging. It has to happen clandestinely because that's not part of the museum world that things are interactive.

So as a kid I was like how is it possible that somebody whose life's work is to understand art and they don't understand something that I understand? How can that be? But then subsequently as an adult I realized, oh well, when people take art history they're taught that art from a certain period is coded messages and that the dog means fidelity and this means this and that means that. If you see a woman holding a small pitcher, that's her reproductive organ. [Laughs] Everything is supposed to be this code so it's like they've been carefully taught this thing that's exactly wrong and they're applying it in a situation where it's wrong. Then I cut them some slack. Except every time I read one I say, "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. *Monogram* [1955–59] is not about anal intercourse. You may be about anal intercourse, but it's not."

Robert Rauschenberg
Monogram, 1955–59
Combine: oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe heel, and tennis ball on canvas with oil and rubber tire on Angora goat on wood platform mounted on four casters
42 x 63 1/4 x 64 1/2 inches (106.7 x 160.7 x 163.8 cm)
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Purchase 1965 with contribution from Moderna Museets Vänner/The Friends of Moderna Museet

Q: A lot of projection there.

Rauschenberg: And that's fine. Everything about that is fine except for the part where you say, "And this is *the* meaning." Or where you say that the conversation I had today is the only thing

that it's going to talk about. That's boring. If you know somebody who's, let's say, a Jehovah's Witness and every time you see them all they want to talk about is your salvation, you don't really want to talk to them. If you have some artwork that only has one thing to say, you only have to look at it once.

Q: Tell me a little bit about—characterize your mother's influence. She described you as the perfect child and then you said, "I'm the luckiest kid in the world." So we have that to begin with. But digging in a little bit and getting concrete about being exposed to her art and her process of working, I would really love to hear about.

Rauschenberg: Well, to me, what's more important than her process of working was her passion for working. Having a sense that this art making is about—I don't know how to say it, but it's about sort of expressing your soul, what some people call continuing education, which sounds very dry. I certainly hope everybody in the world has continuing education. But it's about being curious and excited about the world and trying to understand things and trying, when you look at all the beautiful things in the world, to have a sense of—I love [Henri] Matisse and I love seeing it and can I make something that somebody else will come along and be moved by in that same way that I was moved by Cartier-Bresson or my mom was moved by Matisse?

I think there's this sense I always had that art making is not a solo activity, that art making is sort of a huge, wide group activity in the same way that science is—people understand this about science, that if someone's doing some research on DNA, that it's built on everybody else's research on DNA, and that whatever you figure out, the main importance of you figuring this out

may be that that's then going to give this guy a leg up to get to that. That when the tide comes in, it's not about any individual molecule of water being a genius. It's about working together.

So I had that sense that art making, and life in a parallel way, has to do with it being this sort of giant potluck and everybody's trying to bring something really good to it. And really appreciate what everybody else brings to it and that it's not about who made the best pie or something. It's about just having this cornucopia and richness of delight and contributing to that. I'm not sure that enough people get brought up with that sense of what life is about. That life is about contributing to a cornucopia of beauty and love. That's one of the ways in which I am the luckiest person in the world, I think.

But I think there's a sense that I've taken on very much, that in addition to the work being something that happens collaboratively, that it's also about, if your friend needs something, you help them out. What most people would of course do for family. If your brother is having financial trouble, you give him some money, or if they're going through a really rough period you say, "Oh look, come stay with me," and all that kind of stuff. But to take that notion of family and that you have a shared responsibility for making sure that person is happy and getting what they need, to take that out to the largest possible inclusive view. When people divide the world into us and them, to me that's what makes evil possible. You're not going to do something evil to "us"; you're going to do something evil to "them." And to the degree that everybody is us, that was basically Jesus's position and anything that's great about Christianity, that's the reason why. If Christians acted like Jesus more this would be a different world.

My father's philanthropy was very much of that sort of innocent, almost childlike, well, here's somebody who's having a problem; they've got a medical bill they can't pay. I could pay it, so I do. And it's not like do I want to do that? Wouldn't I rather take a boat cruise or something? It's like well, there's a problem and I can fix it, so I fix it. We always give this example: he was watching one of these infomercials that was about leprosy to raise money, saying there are two million people in the world with leprosy and they can be cured for fifty cents each. He called up his accountant and said, "I just saw this thing and it said there's two million people with leprosy and they can be cured for fifty cents each. That's a million dollars, right?" And, "Yes?" "Okay, let's do it." That's not from a place of like well, could I achieve something better if I did that million dollars in another thing? It's like I heard about a problem and I can fix it, so I will.

To have that I want to say childlike straightforwardness about, there's no difference between you and me, we're all in this together, I think is a great gift and I'm very happy to have it. I'm very happy to have as big an "us" as I can and as small a "them" as I can.

Q: That's beautifully said. It reminds me, we may have talked in the session with your mom and you, about generosity. And you said somewhere, either there or somewhere, that it's not about generosity, it's about just wanting to fix things and help people; that it's not at a high level, it's just how he was and what he wanted to do. He wasn't necessarily thinking of himself as, I'm a philanthropist, but more of a person as a part of a group.

Rauschenberg: Yes and think about it in terms of a basketball team. If you pass the ball to one of your teammates, are you being generous? You're not being generous; you're advancing the team.

My parents and all the people I know, if they get into a gallery, the first thing they do is say, "There's another woman artist, she's great, you have to look at her work." Are they being generous? In one way of looking at things, yes. In another way of looking at things, they're passing the ball around because they're on the same team. I think everybody knows the story about when Leo Castelli came over to my dad's studio and my dad immediately took him down to Jasper [Johns]'s studio and Jasper got awarded a show on the spot at Castelli gallery [New York], and then my dad was like, "Um, wait a minute. What happened there?" [Laughs] But then Leo also quickly said, "Yes, we want to show your work."

It would never occur to them to not do something that you could do for somebody; to not do it would just be weird. Why wouldn't you? Here's a gallery, it would be a good gallery for this person to show in, and their work is good, people should see it. Who are you doing a favor for? The public? The gallery? The artist? Everybody. So, to me, that's the best way to look at the world and I'm happy to have been brought up that way.

Q: I guess maybe you are very lucky.

Rauschenberg: I am. I am. Every sort of category of things that you might hope for, I basically have. I'm not born in a part of the world where it's very tough to live. My parents had enough money, although when I was a kid they didn't have so much—Bob certainly didn't have any money. Bob was famous before anybody would actually buy anything. So he had a long period of having no money. But I'm the color that everybody isn't prejudiced against. I've been very

lucky with my health; I've never really had health problems. However you want to divvy it up, I'm in the right category.

Q: And next time I'd like to really focus on what you're doing in your team with others. I want to ask you a few more follow-up questions to your early life, if that's okay. Or maybe adolescent life. I know that you went to Dalton [The Dalton School, New York] so I'd like to just hear what it was like, were you interested in art at the time and exposed to any real artists there? I know your mom was teaching there.

Rauschenberg: My mom was teaching there and her high school art teacher, Aaron Kurzen, was still there. It's kind of amazing, at my mom's age, she'll have an opening and her high school art teacher is coming to her opening. But anyway, I wasn't so interested in art at that point. At one point in, now I don't remember if it was first grade or second grade, they gave us these little pots of primary-color paint. I decided I would pour it out on the paper and then tip the paper this way and that and make these parallel leg drips across the paper. And the teacher came around and said I couldn't do that, that wasn't painting. I went home and I told my mom and she sent me to school with a note saying, "I'm a painter and that's painting." [Laughs] So I was very happy about that. I think one of the most powerful things to happen to you in your life is when you're right and the teacher's wrong. It's something to bear in mind, if you're a teacher, to look for a situation where the student can be right and you're wrong. [Laughs] I had that in physics class in high school. Every time that happens, you remember it for the rest of your life.

The other thing that my physics teacher did that was great was, when he was handing us out our textbooks at the beginning he said, "Okay, this is your textbook. Everything in this book is wrong. It's the best that we know now, but everything in it is wrong. And should you decide to make a career in physics, your job will to be to rewrite this so that what's in it is better, but it'll still be wrong."

Q: That is so exciting.

Rauschenberg: Okay, sign me up, that's great. It was really about how do you understand the world around you, how do you not just take it for granted, but try to understand it at this circumference-equals-pi-times-the-diameter level? How do you get it to the simplest level and manipulate that scientific model and understand it? So it was that metaphor/scientific model approach that always spoke to me, which I got from my art side of my childhood and my natural math orientation. When I was a kid, I think my mom must've thought to herself, did they check that little bracelet? Just to make sure it's the right kid. "A book of math problems? Cool, mom! Thanks so much." [Laughs] But they were very brave about it and I ended up in the family business anyway. Now remind me what your question was? I keep wandering off.

Q: Oh, nothing. Wandering is what we do in oral history. There are no doors and pathways. Well, let's wander over to New Lincoln High School and why you went.

Rauschenberg: So yes, the other thing I want to say about Dalton though, before we wander away from that, was I had a great teacher in the fifth grade, Mrs. Jenks, Kali Klenia [phonetic].

She was half Greek and half Turkish, so that must have been a complicated family because the Greeks and Turks hate each other. She taught us about the Greeks—that was what we were studying that year—but with this Lab School kind of way of doing it [note: referring to the Lab School, Washington, D.C.], where we each made our own discus and then we had Olympics, and as part of our PE [physical education] class we did discus throwing and all this other stuff. And we made model temples; I didn't actually make mine so much because Bernie helped me with it, which meant he pretty much kind of did it. "I'm an architect, we're making a model of a temple. I got this." "Yes, but I'm supposed to do it." I was happy to have him do it. We made wine and she read the future in the entrails of a chicken. Of course the entrails of the chicken were in a little plastic bag that was from the store, but still— So it was this full sensory, use everything, make things, don't just read about things way of teaching, and that was great. For me that was the most exciting thing at Dalton, that year with her.

From there, when I was in seventh grade I switched up to New Lincoln School, which is on Central Park North, 110th Street.

Q: Why did you move from Dalton to New Lincoln?

Rauschenberg: Well, my parents did that. I think my mom felt like Dalton was just getting too snooty. But also she wasn't teaching there anymore and maybe they weren't going to give me free tuition. I don't know, I was a kid.

But New Lincoln was a great school and both of these schools were like fifty kids in two classes

per grade. They were kind of the same size. Sadly the New York public schools were so deteriorated that even back then nobody would go to the public schools if you had any other choice. That's one of the things that was wonderful about moving to Portland, where everybody goes to public school. That's starting to break down a little bit. But anyway, New Lincoln was really lovely and lively and I was kind of amazed actually when I went to college and discovered that everybody hated high school. I had great fun in high school.

Because it was only two hundred people in the high school, we didn't have student government that was representative government, we had a town meeting student government. So if you wanted to say something in student government, you had to be prepared to stand up and say something in front of two hundred people and that seemed intimidating to me. This is the kid who banged his head against the wall before he learned how to talk in full sentences. But I decided that was unacceptable, to be intimidated by that, so I ran for president of the student government and won. So then I was chairing all the meetings so—you're scared of something? Go in there.

That worked out really well for me and I'm very comfortable with public speaking now and speaking to you. But the one thing, when we were graduating as seniors, our speaker who came was James Earl Jones. And so there I am with my little cracking adolescent voice introducing James Earl Jones, the most beautiful voice in the world.

Q: You channeled him well.

Rauschenberg: And that freaked me out. I wasn't ready for that. I was like [whimpers]. But no, I had a really good time. From eighth grade on, my best friend was the son of the principal of the school and he lived up in the Bronx, above 231st Street; I lived down in Chinatown at minus twentieth street. So we lived, what is that? A dozen miles apart. After school, he'd come to my house or I'd go to his house and anytime one of those two things happened, it was a sleepover because it was too far. And that was really nice and I always felt like I was in a cohort of people who were lively and interesting and understood each other.

One year, in tenth grade—the fifty students are divided into two classes and in tenth grade, I don't know what happened behind the scenes, but we got in the class, we looked around, and we went, all the hip kids are in this random half and not in that one. [Laughs] So somehow Mrs. Goldberg said, "I want these ones." [Laughs] I loved being in that class. And of course, like I say, it was during the Vietnam War and we always felt like we were really getting away with something because instead of having history class, we're talking about the war and why we shouldn't be in this war and it's like we're getting away with it. We're talking about history. At this point it's viewed as ancient history; you have to explain to young people about what the Vietnam War was. But there was this sense that instead of being this dry-as-dust thing—what year was that? Eleventh grade, I think? We were studying American history, we were reading James Beard—not James Beard, that's the cook. It's Beard, but—

Q: Beard, yes. Charles [A.] and Mary [Ritter] Beard.

Rauschenberg: Yes, Charles and Mary Beard. This thing was just dry as dust.

Q: Oh, it is. It's the worst hardest history book I've ever read.

Rauschenberg: Yes, normally reading a book you read maybe a page a minute. This book, I was like eight minutes a page. It was just glacial. We would move through it in class at this incredibly slow rate. We were getting assigned fifty pages a night, which you couldn't possibly read. The first night, I think I read fifty pages. I think it got me through three weeks to have read fifty pages of the book because we just simply couldn't cover that much territory.

Actually my chemistry class went really slowly too. That chemistry teacher was like, "This is page one of the textbook. We're not going on to page two until everybody understands page one." So my friend and I, because it was chemistry class, so there was all this stuff, we made a chess set out of things from the chemistry lab. There was a checkerboard pattern on the floor, so we just sat in class and played chess on the floor. [Laughs] It's like okay, whenever she gets to page two, we'll pay attention for a minute.

But yes, I had a great time in school and I felt very empowered. At one point we declared it to be the revolution, and we went and took the piano out of the teachers' lounge and put it in the student lounge. And it stayed there. [Laughs] There was this sense that I got from that, and obviously that they encouraged at Evergreen too, that your job is to do something. Your job isn't to sit down and shut up; your job is to do something.

Q: It's so empowering for kids. But they need it from the time they're in first and second grade. Yes. That's exciting.

Rauschenberg: Lucky again.

Q: Yes, you were lucky. So I wanted to ask you about this sentence, this letter to your father when you were four. Is that possible? When you wrote, "I hope you still like me, Bob, because I still love you. Please wright, W-R-I-G-H-T, me back. Love, Christopher." [Note: collage element in Untitled, ca. 1954 (55.007), a Combine] Do you remember that?

Rauschenberg: No.

Q: Okay, good. I think the Foundation was interested in whether or not that was your scribble. Okay. So next I'd like to ask you about the Happenings. You were in one of the Happenings?

Rauschenberg: Yes. I had two roles in the Happenings [*Spring Training*, 1965]. One was as lighting distributor. For anybody who remembers those laundry hampers that were like this metal ring on wheels with a canvas bag and a wooden lid that would flop open; there was one of those on wheels, I pushed it out on the stage, flopped open the lid, and it was full of turtles with flashlights taped to their backs. I put the turtles out onto the floor and that was the lighting for the piece. The turtles would crawl around and shine the flashlights on whatever they were pointed at. I would say "were interested in," but "were pointed at" is probably more accurate. Once that had

been accomplished, my next job in the piece was, there was a podium that had a microphone and a phone book, and I tore the pages out of the phone book in an amplified way.

Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg performing *Spring Training* (1965), First New York Theater Rally, former CBS Studio, Broadway and Eighty-first Street, May 1965. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Loewenstein Novick

That was the only one that I was a participant in, up until *Open Score* [1966] in 9 Evenings[: Theatre & Engineering], where I was a ball boy. The piece that Bob did there was a tennis match with Frank Stella and somebody else [note: Mimi Kanarek]. Christine Williams, Dorothea Rockburne's daughter, and I were the ball boys; we would run across and pick up the ball. The tennis rackets were wired for sound and every time they hit the ball—it was in the [69th Regiment] Armory [New York]—one of the lights illuminating the stage would go out. So eventually they hit the ball enough times that the last light went out and they were in complete darkness. There were monitors that the audience could see, monitors picking up infrared camera signals, and basically I think Bob bribed the parents at my school to participate in this piece; a whole bunch of people come out and you can hear them but you can't see them, and they had a list of tasks that they were supposed to do in whatever way they wanted. You were there with them in the room and you could hear them, but you couldn't see them except on the TV. And it

was very complicated at the time to get permission; infrared camera was this top-secret thing and you couldn't use it. It wasn't top secret, but it was not available to the general public, it was sort of military or something. But 9 Evenings was all about Bell Labs and trying to make things happen and giving artists access to stuff that they couldn't get and giving scientists access to artistic curiosity that they would enjoy. So I was in that piece too. Those were the only two that I did. But I was in the audience for other ones; I was in the tiny audiences for some other pieces.

Christopher Rauschenberg, second from bottom left, retrieving a tennis ball during Robert Rauschenberg's *Open Score* (1966), 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, 1966. Film still from *Open Score*, produced by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), 1997. Audiovisual Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q: Were they really tiny audiences?

Rauschenberg: Oh yes. Nobody went to any of this stuff. If you read *Chance and Circumstance* [2009], the book about Merce Cunningham's early years by Carolyn Brown [née Rice], if somebody was willing to have them perform, they would go anywhere. They'd pile into the VW bus and drive 1,500 miles, do one performance, pile back in, and go back home. Nobody cared. Of course this is all the stuff that's iconic and Judson [Dance Theater] and all that stuff. But

nobody went to it. Nobody cared about it. There was one guy who actually photographed the stuff, otherwise there would be no record of it.

Q: Did you become well acquainted or even close with some of the collaborators, like Merce? Did you know him? Could you talk a little bit about him?

Rauschenberg: I didn't know Merce. Of course I knew Steve Paxton and I thought he was great. And I knew [Deborah] Debbie Hay. I knew [Richard] Dickie Landry and Tina Girouard. [Robert] Bob Petersen of course, I knew forever, and he was like family. But it's interesting because there was this way in which, for most of these people, I was like this kid and they weren't very interested in me. So I was this fly on the wall or something like that. But then Julie Martin, for example, was somebody who would come in and suddenly I wasn't a fly on the wall. She was talking to me as a person, as a participant. I thought that was unusual and interesting. And it had to do with who she was.

But yes, I had a good sense in general of what people were about and a few people, like Trisha Brown, I really felt like I was friends with. Julie I really felt like that. Bob Petersen and Steve Paxton. And there were people that I felt like I was not an observer, but that I had a relationship with them. But mostly I was just like here's this interesting stuff going on.

Q: Fun for an adolescent.

Rauschenberg: Sure, yes. Somebody like Brice Marden, for example, who worked for my dad, and I saw him a lot, but I didn't have any real, let's sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk. I remember his story about trying to take his kids to Disneyland with his long hair, which was not allowed in Disneyland, and trying to hide it in a hat. I remember different things. It was part of sitting around the kitchen table on the third floor with a lot of interesting conversations, as an observer. [Debra] Debbie [Taylor, née] Skorupa, who worked for my dad, was a good friend. So it was sort of a continuum.

Q: So did your relationship with your father change over time? And if so, how did it change over time? I know that's a big question so we can just take a tiny bit of that. I'm thinking from childhood to adolescence, that period.

Rauschenberg: Yes, the big change was, like I say, when my mom moved down to Chinatown, and so my dad was on the way home. And I could just come by. I remember one time I was in the neighborhood and I thought, well, I'll just call. Just to be polite, I'll call. And there was a pay phone—at some point somebody's going to have to look up on the Internet what a pay phone was—but there was a pay phone and I went over to call and I picked up the receiver and there was salsa music coming out of the phone. [Laughs] Might as well listen to the salsa music for a while. Then I hung up and just rang the doorbell.

But yes, to be able to just come by and hang out and to not have it be something that we arrange or something like that, just stop by. And then when he moved down to Captiva, I would generally go down there and hang out for part of the summer. I had a Volkswagen bus, not the

Merce Cunningham [Dance] Company bus, but I had a Volkswagen bus and my college buddies, my Reed buddies, and I would pile in and go down and hang out in Florida with Bob. In addition to going and visiting him in Captiva, like I say, I would go when he was having a show opening somewhere and hang out there and that was always great. I always did love listening to him being interviewed because people would ask him such strange questions and he would have to figure out something really interesting to say instead of answering the question.

Q: Can you give me an example?

Rauschenberg: No, not really. But particularly when he was older and in a wheelchair and all this stuff, somebody would ask him a question and there would be this long pause and they would then go, "Uh-oh, he's kind of losing it, maybe I should ask a different question, now it's kind of awkward." And then out would come this really good, interesting answer. Then you would think about it a little bit and you'd go, "Oh wait a minute, there's another layer to that answer." That's really interesting. "Oh wait a minute, there's a third layer." One of the things I guess you learn when you're interviewed and then look at what they wrote and go, "Oh my god," is to think about what do I want to say [laughs] and if somebody says, "Why is your work like picking your nose?" and you say, "Well, my work is not like picking my nose," and then they take away their question and they just quote you as saying, "My work is not like picking my nose," it's like what? Let's not play that game. So he would basically write something rich and complicated in his head and then deliver it. It was a fascinating thing to watch.

My dad was dyslexic and he didn't really read and write much. He could read and write, but that was not a path that he was comfortable on. But he loved words; he was just fascinated with words. If you look at the titles of his pieces, every title of everything is a three-way pun and there's a richness to it; in the same way that, as I was saying, the piece is not about one meaning, the title shouldn't be about one meaning either. So everything was constructed in that rich way and he loved wordplay. My mom too is very interested in words and wordplay. Both her father and her mother were writers, and her father would read her [James Joyce's] *Finnegans Wake* [1939] for a bedtime story. If nothing else, that gives you a different relationship to that really dense, complicated wordplay than most kids have. And she does a poem every day with an image and writing.

I think there was a sense that, for me, if I would come down here, let's say, and stop by after school, that didn't mean that everybody was going to drop everything and that we were going to, "So how are you today?" you know, have a deep conversation of some kind. I would come by and what's going on and who's around and sorry I didn't stay when what was going on was Cartier-Bresson was coming over. But what was going on could be really peculiar. One time I came by and they said, "Oh Chris, great, you're here. You have to try this." I said, "Okay, what?" And they said, "It's really amazing. Vanilla Häagen-Dazs ice cream and ketchup." I said, "That sounds terrible." They said, "You have to try it. It's amazing. You're not going to believe it. It's amazing. It's amazing." You can imagine I resisted for a while and then I finally said, "Okay, okay, I'll try it." And I took a bite of this vanilla Häagen-Dazs with ketchup on it, and it was like a big spoonful of aluminum foil. It was the most horrible thing you ever ate. You'd rather put your finger in a light socket. I went, "Ugh, that's terrible!" And they said, "Isn't that

amazing? Perfectly good vanilla ice cream, perfectly good ketchup. How can it be *that terrible*?" [Laughs] So anything could be going on. But they always had Häagen-Dazs ice cream, so what the hell, how far wrong can you go as long as you keep the ketchup off it?

In general, visiting him was like okay, sometimes there's not really any interesting stuff going on, talk to dad, he's preoccupied with something. He had the TV on. I'm not used to TV. I grew up watching TV when I was a kid, but as adults we never watched TV. So all through our adult years, it was like pay no attention to that horrible box with drivel on it. We would go visit Bob in Florida and we hadn't been there in six months and on his soap opera these same people were still being held captive in the basement.

Q: He loved the drama, huh?

Rauschenberg: Anything else going on, these people get out of the basement? Oh no, no.

Q: Did he ever talk about his life growing up or his mom and dad?

Rauschenberg: He did and if you talked to him and you talked to his sister Janet, who's quite a bit younger than him—

Q; We're talking to her today as a matter of fact.

Rauschenberg: Oh, okay. She will dispute everything that he said about it. But he really felt like he didn't fit in at all. He has all these stories that are basically about that. He said he came back from being in the Navy and he rang the doorbell and there was nobody home and the neighbors looked out and went, "Oh, hi Milton. They don't live there anymore. They live in Lafayette [Louisiana] now." And of course Janet was like, "No, we told him." And when Bob got his award from the Lab School for being dyslexic of the year, as he expressed it to her, she said, "Well gee, Milton, we didn't know you were dyslexic. We thought you were just stupid." [Note: Rauschenberg was awarded the Outstanding Achievers with Learning Disabilities Award from the Lab School in 1985.] They wanted him to be a pharmacist and study pharmacy in school. He got as far on that as when he was supposed to dissect a frog and he wasn't willing to, so that was the end of that. "I'm dropping out, I can't take it. I'm not killing a frog, forget it."

But I think there were resonances for him, when he wanted to move away from New York. His story was, a bunch of his friends were getting divorced and he called in an astrologer and said, "What's going on? My friends are getting divorced. Am I doing something wrong?" This sense of it's all family. And he got back this sort of Delphic message that, "You need to live near water." Well, Manhattan is an island. But anyway, he ended up moving to Captiva and I think there was a familiarity to the Southern-ness of that even though Florida is as much New York as it is the South; that's a good combination, to be half New York and half the South. His father was into all this hunting and fishing, and his sister's husband [Byron Begneaud] was completely into hunting and fishing. But when we went down there, when it got to be close to time for dinner, Bob would kind of do a quick headcount and wade out into the gulf and catch enough fish for dinner.

So I think there was a resonance in being in that climate for him and I think being in New York; everybody wanted to party all the time and come to his house and it's like you can skip the party, but it's hard to if it's at your house and your house is also your studio. So I think it partly had to do with feeling like he wanted more studio time—oh yes, actually I started telling that story. At one point my mom and dad were talking, and my dad said, "Where do you think we go after we die?" And my mom immediately said, "To the studio!" [Laughs] And they were very happy with that then. They were all set.

So anyway, I think Florida made sense in terms of, give me more head-space to do my work and to be less involved in New York's social scene. It wasn't [Andy] Warhol's Factory over here, but it wasn't nothing either. He would go to Max's Kansas City [New York] all the time and everything, but I think it had to do with wanting to get in the studio more and be more focused on making art because that was his favorite thing to do. It's like why am I doing anything other than my favorite thing to do? But I do think there was a Southern resonance too.

Q: It's hard to get rid of.

Rauschenberg: Well and Jasper was—there was a lot of [laughs]—there's not nothing going on down there, it's just everybody fled it.

Q: Yes, but the way that you talk about him being able to walk into the water and scoop up everything he needed for supper, that's a good feeling, being able to take care of yourself and your friends in a very simple way. Without arranging things, just doing it.

Rauschenberg: When he got the property down there, he brought his turtle Rocky, who lived here in the house at 381, brought Rocky down there. Rocky didn't like it at all, like, "What's all this horrible sand on my feet? Blech!" Rocky walked up and put her head against a cinderblock and stood there for three days like that. Bob said, "Okay, okay, next person going back to New York will take you back to your nice wood floors that you like, your nice radiator, the rectangle of sun that you crawl over to." I think he was disappointed though. "I want my turtle living here in Florida."

But Bob had dogs; he loved his dogs. First Laika, and then Kid and Cloud, and then a number of other dogs after that, Star, and a lot of dogs. I think at one point it was up to about six or seven. It was about having a sort of richness in the environment around you and these other beings who have their own agenda and are kind of mysterious. He actually had cats here for a while; he wasn't really a cat person so that was kind of strange. But he was really a dog person; he loved having the dogs.

Rauschenberg with his dog Laika on the roof of his Lafayette Street home and studio, New York, 1968. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust

Q: You mentioned earlier something about his way of looking at the world or working as childlike and I know you meant it in the most positive sense. And that's what I'm asking, in the most positive sense, did he retain that throughout his lifetime?

Rauschenberg: Yes. I think he did. If you look at his ROCI project [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, 1984–91], for example, the way that project started was, he was in China at a place where they do handmade paper [note: Jingxian, Anhui Province, summer 1982]. There aren't that many places around the world where they make handmade paper so he went to most of them. He was in China and through the interpreter he was talking, as he would always do, to the workers. He wants to understand people around him, he's curious about them. So he was talking to the workers and he was asking them had they been here or there. And they said, "No, no, we're not allowed to travel. You have to have an internal passport to go to the next village and you have to have permission. We're not allowed to travel." And he was horrified. It's like that's the most terrible thing I've ever heard. There wasn't a way that he could change that; that wasn't something that he could change. But I think he felt like I have to do something.

So that became the inspiration for his Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, where he said, “Well, I’m going to go to these places that don’t get art and they’re not on the circuit and the people aren’t allowed to travel. And I’m going to have a traveling show that goes from one place like this to the next. It starts off in the first venue with work that I’ve made all over the world and then it gets to the next venue and it’s work that I’ve made all over the world plus the city that I was just in, and I’m going to make work about your city where you are.” It was this traveling, moveable feast. He had Terry Van Brunt shooting videos. Because before the show was there, Bob would walk around and photograph to get images to make art of, but also picking up tin cans, picking up materials to make art with, so that he could make art about that place. And he would have Terry Van Brunt walk around and shoot videos, just what does it look like to walk around in Caracas, Venezuela. So that when the show got to Beijing, where people were not allowed to travel, or to Havana, or to Tibet, where people couldn’t afford to travel, that they could see in addition to seeing all this work that was about these other places and what are these places about and what’s the soul of them, there was also this literal “and what does it look like to walk on the sidewalk in these places?”

In Beijing, people were really interested in the videos. They were watching the videos like crazy. They were fascinated by this kind of artwork that they had never seen. In all fields there are people who come in and that field can be divided into before them and after them. In photography, Robert Frank is the dividing line. You just change the level of ambition and change the rules that the game is being played under. Bob was certainly that and his work was that. But then the idea of the show wasn’t about him; it wasn’t saying, “Look how great I am.” It was

really about, “You’re being denied a chance to experience the world in a rich way and there’s a lot of stuff out here and let’s see if I can get some of it to you.”

Rauschenberg taking photographs on the road to the world’s oldest paper mill in Anhui Province, China, 1982. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Elyse Grinstein

When he had this idea and this’ll bring world peace and people will understand each other and all that stuff—everybody’s going, “Yes, Bob, yes, yes, yes.” But there was this directness and childlike-ness, if you want, about that. It was just like, “I’m going to do this.” He kept trying to get people to fund it and they wouldn’t fund it and it was getting too complicated. He just at one point realized, I need to just sell some work that I have by other people, just go ahead and cannibalize my collection and make this happen on my own and just do it. It happened on a low budget. The Venezuelan Army flew the show [laughs] to the next country. It was like, “Okay, let me make sure that we get through this without actually starting a war somehow.”

So the idea that seemed so childlike and simple, it actually worked. It was really important. It was probably the most important thing that happened in China in terms of the art world in China now. And there was this richness, to go to Havana for the Cuban people. That was this really important thing. And he was the first non-Tibetan to have a show in Tibet. It was all this stuff

that actually did what he said it was going to do, it really did increase understanding around the world. It really did all these things that people were going, "Yes, Bob, yes, Bob."

Q: So he didn't succumb to the cynicism.

Rauschenberg: No. He was not into cynicism. That's the thing about cynicism: if all you want to be is right, then you can be cynical. But if you aspire to more than that, then you have to not be; you have to say, "Okay, I know everything is corrupt and everybody is screwed up," but just go right past that into saying, "I'm going to be real with you and we're going to do something."

In math and logic there's something called the Prisoner's Dilemma, a situation in which you take two people—you arrest two people who you think are bank robbers, let's say—and you put them in two cells. To each person you say, "We know you did it and if you confess we'll let you off with a one-year sentence. But if you don't confess and he tells us you did it, then he gets the one-year sentence and you get the ten-year sentence." So it's about, what are you going to do? If you both don't confess, then you both get no sentence. But if one of you confesses, the other guy gets a ten-year sentence. So do you narc on the other guy or do you keep your mouth shut? Do you cooperate or do you compete basically. The question was, what's the best strategy? Mathematically, what's the best strategy? It was a problem that people worked on quite a bit and once there were computers you could actually try these out, do a million scenarios. The best strategy turns out to be that you start off cooperating, but if the other person competes, you retaliate. You basically mirror them, whatever they do. You start off cooperating, then mirror what they do, meaning they know that if they cooperate, you're going to cooperate; you create

that pattern. And what actually is the best one is to also inject extra cooperation, to try to get things on the right track. So I think if you have somebody who is always, "I'm never going to tell on you no matter what," you would think that's the best strategy. But in the real world, people will not necessarily respond well to that.

But I think basically he would periodically have somebody who would do something not nice. "Yes, you can use my movie camera," and you're not giving it back, and it's like okay, we're just moving on. For him, I think he felt like I don't want to get mired in negativity and cynicism and all that kind of stuff. I want the world to be a certain way and if something isn't that way, if you're eating your beans and there's a rock in there because it was the same size as the beans, you just skip the rock, just let that go. And go back to the beans. I think that was really his thing. Okay, I want to keep in a place of positivity to the degree that one can; your emotions aren't under your control completely. But that was his basic strategy in life. It was, okay, I want to move forward and I want to trust people and I want to like people and if that's misplaced, so be it.

The photographer Robert Frank was that way too. Bad things would happen to him and he would just refuse to become cynical. And he got to be famous so everybody wanted to call him up and everybody wanted something from him. He just ignored that. He refused to believe that he was famous. If you run into him on the street, "Oh, let's talk—" and a hundred people are trying to call him and they can't get him, but if you just run into him on the street, then he's completely there. So it's a way to try to be normal in a crazy thing.

We were in Germany in 1994 and I was having a show in Cologne [*Chris Rauschenberg, USA*, Galerie Lichtblick] and my dad was having a show at the museum in Dusseldorf [*Robert Rauschenberg*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen], and Cologne and Dusseldorf are right across from each other. He gave a press conference and the director of the museum made some remarks and said, "Bob, do you have some remarks to make?" Bob basically didn't, he said, "No, let's just take questions." It was a room with fifty, seventy-five reporters. Nobody had a question. No questions. The museum director was kind of like, "Okay, well, I guess we're done then." Then they all came rushing up, "Here, will you sign this, will you sign that," so then I can sell it for a lot of money. It was just the trashiest thing. We went to the opening of that museum show and we fled it because everybody was trying to get him to sign stuff and it was just like being a naked woman on a military base or something. You just don't want to be there. [Laughs]

It's funny too because we have a photographer that we just showed at Blue Sky and I bought a copy of his book and he said, "Do you want me to sign it?" I said, "No, that's okay." I didn't want him to feel bad or anything. I said that I was with my dad watching people just see dollar signs in their eyes, here, sign this, sign this. It doesn't make me feel good. I don't have people sign my books. Also you do it so that it's more valuable. Well, then it's more valuable so now you have to guard it.

Q: I've always thought that. Then you can't give it away.

Rauschenberg: Well, you can't give it away, you can't put it in the gallery library because people will steal it. A book is a tool. Do you want your hammer signed? Or do you want to use it to hit

nails? A book is a tool and it shouldn't be made into something that diminishes its capacity to do its job. Was that the end of that question or was there more there?

Q: That was a pretty profound ending. Well, I think we're almost done in terms of my first set of questions for today. But perhaps we could, as a way of creating a little space for where we're going to go next, take you back to 1973 again. You've graduated and you move and how did you think about what you wanted to do at that time? And I guess we also haven't talked about your wife at all. You met her at Reed so I'd like to hear you talk about her a bit. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes, and then we'll close for today and we'll be prepared for next time.

Rauschenberg: Okay. Yes. I met my wife at Reed. I had a girlfriend at the time who was on her dorm floor and my friend [James] Jimmy [Kagan], who is still my close friend and we're going to Tanzania together, he and his wife and Janet and I, on Friday—he was dating Janet's roommate and in the dorm room, Janet was the one with the door to the hall, and you had to go through Janet's room to get to Nancy [Jo Coleman]'s room. So I mostly knew Janet from walking through her room. But no, we also knew each other as friends. We were in drawing class together and I was doing a small photo book for one of my papers, a literature paper about my analysis of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* [Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910].

Q: Of who?

Rauschenberg: Anyway, when we got together and I went up to Evergreen, she was like, "Oh, I'm going to move to Boulder, Colorado, and be a social worker." Then she sort of called me up

and said, "No, I'm going to come with you," [laughs] and came. Then I was at Evergreen and she wasn't that first year, and then she became an Evergreen student. She became one of the two people who did all the health care for the whole school; she went and trained in Los Angeles in women's healthcare as a non-nurse. Then she started and ran the women's clinic at Evergreen.

Q: *Our Bodies, Ourselves*?

Rauschenberg: Yes, yes. In the college healthcare facility, gynecology is a big part of what the students need, never mind why. But then when I graduated in '73, we still had our friends in Portland, although most of them had come up to Olympia. Like our friend Jessie Jones from Reed, she was still in Portland; we would go down to visit her a lot. And Olympia wasn't like Stony Creek, Connecticut; it wasn't totally without any culture, but it was not a college town. The movie theater had basically Walt Disney movies; they did show 3-D triple-X *The Stewardesses* [1969] at one point, which seemed a little off-topic. But if we wanted to go to an interesting movie, we had to either go up to Seattle or down to Portland. So half the time we went up to Seattle, which was only one hour away, or down to Portland, which was two hours away, and then we could visit our friends down there.

We basically knew that as soon as we graduated we were going back to Portland. It was a great place to live. It was very cheap at the time. It's still the cheapest big city on the West Coast, but that's more a factor of how expensive the other ones are. But it was very lively and Portland had the sense that I was talking about earlier, of people wanting to do things with a team spirit, let's all pitch in and make something happen. That's how I was brought up and that spoke to me and I

loved that about it. So I moved back down to Portland and in 1975 a friend of mine who was a photographer was sharing a darkroom with another friend of hers and then the front two rooms—it was a storefront, three rooms, first two with weavers having looms set up; the third room was Ann [Hughes] and Bob [DiFranco]'s darkroom and then there was a shared bathroom with the guru [Prem Rawat] Maharaji next door with a picture on the toilet of the Perfect Master. The weavers moved out so suddenly there were two rooms that were the size of a freight elevator vacant. The rent on the whole place was sixty dollars a month so for forty dollars—and it's a good location, Twenty-third Avenue and Lovejoy Street—Twenty-third was one of the two big streets in Northwest Portland, in the most urban part of the city.

So it didn't make sense to take on some new roommates who, you were in between them and the bathroom, and a darkroom you don't really want somebody walking through, it has to be dark and all that. It was a little awkward. So we just sort of said let's put up some pictures. Oh yes, that could be a gallery. Oh, I know some people who might want to do a gallery. There ended up being five of us; I was the fifth one to join in. And we started a little gallery in these front two rooms. From that point on there was no way I would move out of Portland because you had all this ease. In New York City if you've got ten errands, that's like three weeks' worth of errands. In Portland if you've got ten errands, you might be able to do them all today, maybe a couple of them tomorrow. It's so easy to do stuff.

It was so cheap there. We had a two-story, two-bedroom house for eighty dollars a month at one point, Jimmy and Frida [Kagan, née Savage Habbick] and I. It was just cheap. What that meant was, you didn't have to work very much. What it meant was—Bob had been sending me a five

hundred dollars a month allowance to live on when I was in school and I graduated from school and he kept sending it to me. Actually Castelli sent it to me. Bob, starting when he was showing at the Stable Gallery [New York], was getting a stipend. That's another story, which you may have heard from somebody already. So anyway, I was getting this money and in Portland I can live on that and I can afford to travel, I can do all this stuff. So I just, yes, this is where I want to be.

Once we had the gallery there, people from all over the country and eventually all over the world, were sending work to us to look at. And if we saw something we liked, we could give it a show and make things happen for the artist. We were doing a poster for every show and those posters were going out all over the country and people were thinking we must be this amazing gallery instead of a freight elevator. We were getting a lot of money from the National Endowment for the Arts; we were like this classic perfect artist base, except for the fact that we were tiny. But no, by the time we were getting money from the National Endowment, we had moved to a slightly bigger location. But anyway, it had that mix of being able to do stuff and being a nice place to live and yet culturally rich. Now we have Powell's Books, which is the biggest bookstore in the country, it's three blocks from our gallery, and it's great for that.

Q: Great. Well, thank you for that introduction and thank you for today. I've learned a lot. I've really learned a lot.

Rauschenberg: It's been my pleasure.

Q: Thank you.

Rauschenberg: Thank you.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Interviewee: Christopher Rauschenberg

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark (Q) and Cameron Vanderscoff (Q2)

Session #2 (video)

Location: New York, New York

Date: January 17, 2016

Q: This is Mary Marshall Clark with Christopher Rauschenberg. I'm delighted to see you again today; it's been about a year.

Rauschenberg: It's true.

Q: And thank you for trekking up to Columbia.

Rauschenberg: My pleasure.

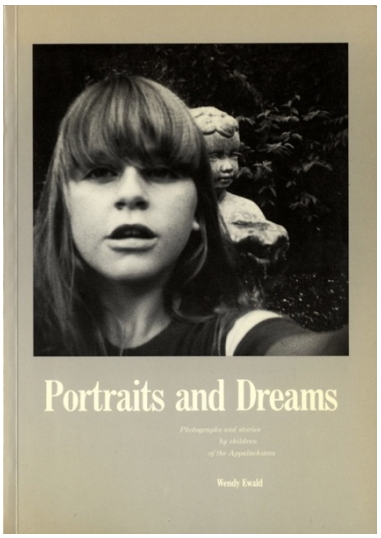
Q: The last time we talked, you were trekking out to Tanzania and I just thought we'd begin by following up exactly where we left off. I want to ask you about that trip and Wendy Ewald and I think it's referential to the shirt you're wearing, so—

Rauschenberg: Yes, it is. Yes, we had a great time, it was very moving to go and we went on safari for five days, looking at how it was to be an animal before people took over and messed up. [Laughs] We sat in on a number of teacher trainings that Wendy Ewald was doing and that was great, and of course I took pictures all over the place and bought the fabric and had this shirt

and two other shirts made. But no, we had a great time. It was really good. One of the great things about travel always is to see not only how things are somewhere else but then to be able to sort of have that perspective with you. [Laughs] If you never travel, you think there's only one way to do things, however they do it wherever you happen to have come up. And it's just nice to see more and not take as much for granted.

Q: Great, fantastic. Another thing we talked about that I think is relevant of Wendy and maybe you can speak a little bit about who she is, is the connection between empathy and photography you were talking about last time.

Rauschenberg: Yes, well Wendy Ewald is somebody who has, since the sixties basically, her career has been about using photography with kids and to not just teach them the technique of photography, but to teach them that photography is a way to let somebody else look through your eyes. So the first project that she did was in a Canadian Native American community; but the first project she's known for was in Appalachia and was called *Portraits and Dreams* [1985] and she was the photography teacher for this group of Appalachian kids. She had them photograph the people they loved and the animals they loved and she had them act out their dreams that they had at night (as opposed to their dreams for themselves in the future). A dual meaning. She just had to make these great pictures. It is the nature of photography that is about seeing the world through somebody else's eyes and to be able to understand these kids by seeing what they cared about and what was their life like, not through some grown-up telling you about it, but them telling you about it directly with their own photographic vision. It was a great thing.



Cover of Wendy Ewald, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories of Children of the Appalachians*, 1985

Right now she is working on a project which is a little different from most of the things she's done in that she's actually trying to— In the schools of Tanzania, as in many places, they don't have many materials. A classroom is a long thin room with open holes for windows on both sides because there's no electricity, so there are no lights in the room. So you have to have big windows to let light in. There's a rectangle of blackboard on one end of the room and that's it. Some of them have desks, some of them don't. Most have desks, I think. But they just learned things by rote, the teacher says something and you repeat it back, and the teacher writes something and you write it down. Wendy really wanted to take the national curriculum and bring some more creativity into it so that everything isn't done by rote. And she's worked with the national curriculum: Okay, what kinds of things would be useful for you to have? Then she made a series of ten posters with photographs on them to illustrate all kinds of things that are in the national curriculum. It might be math, it might be AIDS, it might be who are the tribes of Tanzania. It's all these different things, all woven together. One of the posters is about reading photographs. So it has photographs on it and this is the one she used to start with, for the training. She would have the teachers look at it and say, "Okay, name everything you can see

that's in this picture." It was surprisingly hard for them to do it. We were going through a series of steps that she had with the teachers, culminating in having them pick one of the five or six pictures on the poster and write a story from the point of view of one of the people in the picture. So what would it be like if you were one of those people?

[INTERRUPTION]

Rauschenberg: She would have them pick one of the five or six images on the poster and choose a person in the picture and tell a personal narrative of what it would be like to be that person. Again the idea is that a photograph has a huge number of details in it and each of those details is something that you could grab onto as a handle [laughs] to get an understanding into what's going on, to say oh yes, that hairbrush there is just like the one my mother used to brush my hair with or my grandmother had. So there are all these points of personal connection that a line drawing doesn't have because of all that detail.

It's interesting because you could see the teachers go, you know; on day one, at one point with one of the teachers' trainings, we were talking about what you had to bring to the classroom and I said something like creativity, and one of the teachers said, "No, no, that doesn't belong in the classroom." And of course by the end of the training, they didn't think that way.

So she would do this lesson with the teachers and with the school district teacher trainers, and then she would have them in groups each take a classroom and teach the lesson to the kids. Wendy said, "Okay, the idea of this is they don't have to get it right away, they don't have to

understand it." But at the point where they would turn around and teach it to the kids, you could see them finally get it; it was like oh, the kids are raising their hands, they're all excited. Of course these teachers are one teacher to seventy-five kids in a classroom, so they're very charismatic because they have to be. [Laughs] I think they could see that this is a useful thing, so we'll see what happens with it. It's hard, they're basically—it's conceived to be ten thousand sets of posters and going out to forty thousand, maybe, it's forty thousand, I think. Going out to every school in the country and it's really about trying to change a whole country at once. It's very ambitious and it's not so much geared toward working with individual kids. It's stepping up one or two steps in the food chain, trying to work with the teachers and with the people who are supervising the teachers.

Q: It's so interesting how you describe it because that empathy connection, her instruction to tell the life story of another person is the basic empathy training. And all the details are props that they can use to start that process of narration. Beautiful. Well, you started as a child as a photographer. Can you tell us how that came about?

Rauschenberg: Well, my mom had a Rolleiflex camera, which is a twin lens camera, which is a big heavy camera. I tried to take pictures with it of course. I still have the negatives but my pictures are completely blurry [laughs] because the camera weighed as much as I did. I kind of tripped the shutter and it was like shooting with a shotgun or something; it had this kick. Anyway, so she realized that maybe I ought to have my own camera that I could work better. She got me one of those little Brownie box cameras and she and I would go walk around and take

pictures together when I was six years old, and she taught me how to make prints in the darkroom.

We lived in a railroad flat—a railroad flat is an apartment where to get from room A to B to C to D, there's no shortcut from room A to C or B to E. It's just a line, like a train, and I had the middle room, so there were windows on one end, windows on the other end, and I was in the middle. So my room was the darkroom and if you know what a Murphy bed is, the fold-a-bed, well we had a Murphy darkroom. Folded down like a table, there was an enlarger that sort of pulled out and she'd set up the trays. I would always know when she was going to do some darkroom work because these one-gallon, brown glass jars would appear in the bathroom. I was like oh, dark room night, and read under the covers until she thought it was safe and she'd get the trays set up and I would say, "Can I print too?" She taught me how to print; I didn't print very well, but it doesn't matter. [Laughs] It's just to do it. I made little kinds of books of my photographs that I gave to all my family members when I was six and when I was seven.

Q: Do you recall some of the titles of the books?

Rauschenberg: Yes, the book was called "Abstract Photography," which of course is an oxymoron because that's the nature of photography, to not be abstract. If you'd see some picture and you can't tell what it is, the first thing you say is, now what is this?

Q: But you were probably hearing the world abstract a lot in your household?

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: Probably. It's interesting, when I went to high school, I started in photography again. I sort of waned in the middle. I saved up and bought myself a camera and started doing some photography and when I got to college I did more. I ultimately decided that I didn't like being a physics major [laughs] it was my best subject in high school so I was like I like physics and math. But then it was during the Vietnam War and I was reading *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut [1963] and thinking, okay, if I become a physicist, what am I going to be making? Ice nine? [Laughs] Am I going to be working for Dow to try to make stickier napalm? It just doesn't speak to me. So having been the black sheep of the family as a math and physics kid, I ended up in the family business anyway, the art business.

Q: Well, since we're on that subject, just tell us a bit of that and then we'll rewind again and go back a bit. But tell us a bit about what you've done. You settled in Portland?

Rauschenberg: Yes, I went out to Reed College in Portland, it was a school with a very strong physics department and it had the reputation of being very progressive and interesting. When I looked in the catalogue, people looked like me. Which is always something that is a bigger decision point than it probably should be. I went up there and the way that Reed was progressive, it was that the school was run by the faculty, but that was a double-edged sword because at that particular moment, the more conservative faculty were in the majority and they wanted to make sure the Reed degree "meant something." Freshmen were not allowed to take literature courses and all this; it was very sort of rigid in all their stuff. That was a very poor fit for their student

body in 1969. [Laughs] A significant number of people left the first week of school, sort of went, "No, this isn't for me."

I went there for two years, but after one year I knew I wasn't going to graduate from there. So I just took whatever courses I was interested in and then I didn't quite know what I was going to do next. I actually got an application for Ringling Brothers Clown College, but I didn't end up applying to it because one of my psychology professors said, "You should look into this Evergreen State College that's opening up. I think it's a good place for you." I looked into it and it seemed really great and it actually was really great and it was stocked very heavily with Reed students and faculty. My photography teacher at Evergreen had been my humanities teacher at Reed and the Reed professor who was one of the co-authors of the physics textbook that I loved in high school went up to Evergreen too. It's what everybody was looking for [laughs] when they went to Reed.

Evergreen is great. The idea is that rather than the traditional model, which is that you have somebody who is the professor, the expert in his field, and he imparts what he knows, which you then memorize and now you know what you need to know. You memorize all the facts that you need for the rest of your life in that field. It's kind of the old model. What Evergreen said is well, that's not how things work, you have a problem, you need to solve it, it requires multiple disciplines to solve a problem and it requires research. Whatever you're doing, you don't already know whatever you need to know. [Laughs] So we're going to teach you how to problem solve. How to say okay, I'm going to take multiple disciplines and figure out how to do this. There was a class that was about building a ship, which is construction, but it's a lot of math. It's a lot of

science and other things all mixed together. My course was less broad ranging in its areas because I took photography and film my first year and then just photography my second year. But I had already had two years of general studies at Reed.

My best friends were in a class called environmental design. Some of their classmates actually ended up talking their way into designing a city park in Olympia, Washington. Jimmy and Frida saw there was an old farm on the land that the college bought. If you're starting a college, you buy as much land as possible, contiguous land, every inch of it, because once you're in, you can't buy any land because it's too expensive. You have gentrified this little stretch of nowhere in the middle of the country. So they bought all this stuff that they didn't need and on the master plan there was going to be a parking lot. But if you actually walked out there, there was an old farm. So Jimmy and Frida, my best friends, went to the school and said, "You need a farm, you don't need a parking a lot. You need a farm." They talked them into letting them do it.

[INTERRUPTION]

Rauschenberg: So my best friends went to the school administration and said, "You don't need a parking lot, you need a farm." This would be a great educational thing and they talked them into it and then they went out and with a sort of learning contract said what they were going to do and faculty supervising them. They went out and they pulled out the stumps that were there that had come up because in Pacific Northwest, if you look away for a minute, there's a big tree. [Laughs] They pulled out all these stumps, they rebuilt the farmhouse, they got a cow donated; they created this farm. And it's a big part of the school curriculum now. But it came from the

students. My wife, she got interested in women's healthcare and she went down and got trained as an Evergreen student. She went down to L.A. and got training and then came back up and started the Women's Clinic. She and the doctor were the two main healthcare providers and she wrote the protocol and manuals for the Women's Clinic and all that stuff.

Their system there, they have a lot of internships. And their system is that if you think you want to do this, start doing it. A, you may discover that you don't like doing it and you save yourself four years and a lot of money finding that out at the beginning instead of the end, but also B, just get in the middle of it and start doing it and learn as you go. Be surrounded by people who know what they're doing so you're not going to bring the ship down, but that's how you learn, jump in and do it. I think it's very powerful; I think it's a great school. I recommend it to anybody and it still is that way. They do have some grade equivalents now, which they didn't when I first went there. They put that in because people were having trouble saying, but if I'm going to apply to graduate school, they need to know I'm an A student. They don't need a six-page written evaluation.

Anyway, I loved it. So I went there for two years and then moved back down to Portland. The thing that I loved about Portland is this tremendous cooperative sense in the community of hey, let's get together and do something. Let's make something happen. There never was any arts money in Portland. It used to be on the state-by-state breakdown of support for the arts, we came in fifty-first. We were behind Guam. [Laughs] So there was nothing there and that can be an advantage because it means there's no competition, there's nothing to fight over. So if we're going to have bread, we're going to have to plant wheat. [Laughs] The whole arts community

was kind of like that, of making things happen. In 1975 we started a photo gallery because there was a small storefront that was forty dollars a month. So we started it up as a gallery and now it's forty years later and we have thirty-seven hundred square feet and we've done more than eight hundred and forty shows. [Laughs]

Christopher Rauschenberg at Blue Sky, Portland, Oregon, 1995. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Rose Howerter, *Oregonian*

But it was just here, there's five of us, the rent's only forty dollars, how much have you got? [Laughs] We'd just chip in and pay the rent. One of the five people was a great graphic designer so we did a poster every month and another photographer told us about a wholesale printer that we could get the poster printed for, well, what was it, maybe seventy dollars or something. We just did everything that way; somebody would say, "Here, I'll do that." We couldn't afford to print two sides of the poster or get it folded. So once a month we'd get together and fold all of the thousand posters in quarters and rubber stamp the return address on the back and put the address labels on and sort them by zip code. We had everything done by hand because we had hands, we didn't have any money. That was very typical of the community. The dancers got together and started a dance space, and there's been a whole series of dance spaces, but there's

one now that's a Rauschenberg Foundation SEED grantee. There are actually two dance spaces in Portland that are SEED grantees.

Q: What are the names of those groups?

Rauschenberg: One is Performance Works Northwest and one is Conduit [Dance], and Conduit just lost their space, which is typically what happens. Of course you're not going to buy your space if you don't have any money. And this classic thing of suddenly the rent is—you can't get it and maybe it's not even offered and they sort of went dark for a few months and now they've opened up in a space that's going to slowly ramp up to market rate. At which point they won't be able to afford it again. But yes, again, it's run by a bunch of dancers who get together. They had a fundraiser last night. My wife went to it and there was one person sitting there with the door locked. She sort of knocked on the door and said, "Isn't there a fundraiser here?" And they said, "Oh no, we changed the date."

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: "Okay, well, let me know next time." And then another couple was walking up to go to it too and it's like okay, this is what happens when you just have all volunteer artists doing stuff. Not everything works great.

Q: But what a great, unique situation to be able to make it your own in that way.

Rauschenberg: Yes, it's wonderful.

Q: And to have the consistency every time. So this is the Blue Sky gallery?

Rauschenberg: So Blue Sky gallery, we have a meeting every week. Every Tuesday night we have a meeting of whoever's interested in being the curator of the gallery. We get together and we look at work for a couple of hours and talk about it and decide what to show as a group and those weekly meetings have been going on for forty years. And once a month at our meeting, we're not looking at work, we're hanging the show. [Laughs] Whatever we picked earlier. It's a really nice community; it's a really lovely thing.

It's funny because periodically when I come to New York to see my mom or to do something for the Foundation, maybe once every couple of years I'll just invite a number of the photographers who live in New York who we've shown at the gallery and that I know. Just, hey, why don't you bring some work over, let's get together and look at each other's work. And every time we'll get together they'll say oh, this is great, we never do this. We haven't done this since you did it two years ago, and I'm like why not? We get together every week at Blue Sky. I started a thing in Portland, which is the Portland Grid Project, which is photographing a different one percent of the city of Portland every month. Over a roughly nine-and-a-half-year period, you cover the whole city. I took a map of the city and cut it up into eighty-nine squares and each month a dozen of us would photograph the same one percent of the city, get together at the end of the month, and look at each other's pictures. Where was that bench?

Christopher Rauschenberg
Photographs for the Portland Grid Project
Left: May 2006, Right: July 2010
Courtesy Christopher Rauschenberg

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: How come I didn't see it? Three of you had that bench, that was so good. And then hand out new maps and everybody goes out again. It's on its third round now. It's been going for more than twenty years. It's on round three. I did the first two rounds and then dropped out. Nobody's done more than two rounds, I don't think, but people have come in and come out at different points. So that's another thing that meets every month. There's a group of photographers that I'm part of that meets about once every six weeks and we just get together and look at each other's work.

There are about three other groups that I know of that get together like that and meet, one of which was started in the fifties. Minor White used to do Portland workshops. Those workshops are what you see if you look in the oldest issues of *Aperture* magazine, they're transcripts of these Portland workshops that he did. The same people would take the workshops over and over,

and at one point they sort of looked at each other and said well, we could get together when Minor's not here too. [Laughs] And that's the interim of the Interim [Group] workshop. And they opened up a little. One of them was a doctor at Good Samaritan Hospital and he talked his way into having a hallway gallery that's older than Blue Sky. It's from '72, I think. He's been continuously running it. I don't know of an older continuously running photography gallery in the country. There might be one because if you weren't in Portland, you wouldn't know of this one. [Laughs] But again it's that spirit of let's get together, do something, let's make something happen, and that's what I love.

Q: Amazing story. How many—have the number of photographers grown in Portland over time? Over that forty-year period?

Rauschenberg: Yes, the number of photographers everywhere has grown. Pretty much everyone in America has a camera in their pocket at all times now. And if you go somewhere, wherever you are, other than in this room where we've all turned our phones off, anywhere else you are, there's somebody with a phone out taking a picture of something. So it's pretty explosive.

Q: So you also taught art for quite a period of time?

Rauschenberg: Yes. I taught first at Evergreen where I taught entry-level stuff, which I didn't enjoy really, but then I taught at Marylhurst College [Oregon], which has since become Marylhurst University. I taught there for, I think, fourteen years. I taught photography and then I taught another class with a friend of mine who is a performance artist. It's a class called "Close

to Home," that was about how do you take the things that happen to you in your life and remanufacture those into art? What is that process where your experience becomes art? And so it was a class that was open to all disciplines, artists and non-artists. We had people writing music, making movies, doing drawings. But it was about this sort of basic process. At the beginning of the class, we'd have somebody sit down with a tape recorder and tell a story that's what we call a soul story of something that happened to them that affected their soul. [Laughs] Don't explain to us who Phil is, just say, "Phil and I were doing this." Don't explain to us why it moved you; just give us the straight story. Of course nobody knows how to write and if you've ever read college students' writing, you will know this is true. But everybody knows how to tell a story of something that really moved them. So they would tell the story and we'd tape and then transcribe it. Then we would work with that story. We would have them take images out of it. We had everybody make a deck of image cards, if you know the Mexican *lotería* cards that have these very, sort of archetypal images. *La escalera*, the ladder. *El corazón*, the heart. These very archetypical images and just the simple word underneath it. We had them make their own deck of things that were powerful archetypal symbols for themselves so that if you said oh, I want to make some art, I don't know what to do. What you used to call a blank sheet of paper and a typewriter; well, I might have to explain to a younger audience what a sheet of paper or a typewriter is. But you could just take your deck of things and deal out the red dress [laughs] the candy cane, the whatever, and say oh, this is about my grandfather, okay. Whatever combination you would draw out of the deck would have a powerful thing to it because everything in it is powerful. It's like playing positive Russian roulette with a bullet in every chamber.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: If I can put something so tortured as that on the table.

Q: That sounds great. How did this community stimulate your own artistic process do you think?

Rauschenberg: Well, it's great to have an audience for what you're doing. You see somebody like—everybody knows about Vivian Maier, but there are photographers all over the country who would work really hard and really seriously with no community, no path to anything. It's hard to imagine now, when photography is so integrated into the art world. But when I was a young photographer, there were two photography galleries in New York and MoMA showed photography at the museum, but hardly any museums showed photography. There were hardly any galleries that showed photography. Galleries that were general galleries didn't have photography. By general they meant everything but photography. [Laughs] Well, they didn't show crafts. There were other things they didn't show, but they meant basically painting and sculpture. There was really no public marketplace. So if you were in a community that had a community marketplace, if I can put it that way. A community marketplace isn't quite the word. Agora. [Laughs] A place to get together and see what each other are doing and share ideas and support each other. And there were for us.

We started the gallery in 1975. We originally started it as a gallery that just showed local photographers because we knew a lot of local photographers. Within three months we were getting show proposals from all over the country. Now our shows are about one third international, but it was just immediately something that people needed. There's a whole bunch

of non-profit photo galleries that are from the mid-seventies. There are eight of them, they're all still there. But it's one of these things where you think you're just walking down the street and then you look behind you and you're leading a parade. It's like you're providing something that everybody needs and therefore they're behind you. [Laughs] So I think that was really a valuable thing.

Then of course, for me, that put me in touch with people all over the country. We've shown seven hundred different artists by now, but even early on we were showing. We used to only do nine shows a year but now we do twenty-four. But still, it added up fast. So I ended up having shows in a lot of places because that meant that if I showed somebody from Albuquerque there was somebody in Albuquerque who knew what I was doing. In fact the first show that I had was in Albuquerque. You have the catalogue right there, *Light & Substance* catalogue [note: exhibition presented at the University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, 1974]. That was when [Frank] Van Deren Coke ended up being curator at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [SFMOMA], which has become one of the most important museums for photography in the country. If you go to SFMOMA, well you can't go there now because they're remodeling. But if you go there before they close [laughs] for two years, half the shows there are photography shows at any moment. It's really become very important.

So anyway, he knew about me because of Blue Sky. So it's one of these things where, if you're an art student in college and you think to yourself, okay, I'm about to have this piece of paper in my hand, but what do I do next? If you think you're going to come out of school, open up the help wanted ads or go on Craigslist and look for "artist wanted, high pay." [Laughs] It's just,

nobody wants you, forget it. But if you get off your butt and start doing something, you go from being one in a hundred thousand art majors to being one in six people who are doing something and you immediately come to everybody's attention. At our time period Portland had very low real estate prices and everything. The thing that we could step up and do was to start a gallery. Now, or if in you were New York, there's no low rent. You're not going to start a physical gallery, but maybe you do something on the web, maybe you do this, maybe you do that. We've had a crop of photographers who started up photo blogs that were interesting photo blogs and then their work got to be known because of that. I think there's always some target of opportunity that you can use to actually get something done, even though there's no support in the larger society for what you're interested in. There's always something you can do, that you can put yourself where people can find you.

Q: Beautiful story. I want to dial a little further back and ask you what kind of photography were you taught at Reed? And when—

Rauschenberg: At Evergreen.

Q: And when did you first fall in love with it, I guess, is my real question?

Rauschenberg: Okay, yes. Well, when I first went to Evergreen.

Q: Evergreen, yes.

Rauschenberg: When I first went to Evergreen, I took a photography and film class. I loved film, but this was before digital video. Film meant shooting 16-millimeter. To buy a roll of film, get it developed, and get a print made from it so that you're not putting your original negative in a projector where there's a significant chance it will be destroyed. To do those things was an equivalent of a month's rent for three minutes. So it's like it's just impossible to get enough done. This is true not just of students, but since I'm a student at this time, I'll put this in the way of students. If you're a student, you've got a whole bunch of ideas and most of those ideas are stupid. In the line are some good ideas. But you can't jump ahead to them because you don't know what's good and what isn't good. [Laughs] So the important thing is to have the line be moving. So you do twelve projects and eleven of them are stupid and one was really good. So then you say well that one was really good, let me do something else like that. But if the line is not moving, if you can only shoot three minutes of film a month and even that is doubling your rent, the line just isn't moving fast enough to learn anything. My classmates who were film majors, people who would tell you, oh, I'm a film major. Oh great, let's see your films. Well, I haven't made any films. That was not for me. And then with photography, of course, it's a school so there was a darkroom. You could shoot pictures, go develop the film, make a print the same day, look at it, and then go out tomorrow and make a print that's based on that. That thing that I'm saying, one of these twelve bad ideas was actually really interesting so I'm going to base it on that. So it's the equivalent of being like a fruit fly for evolutionary purposes. You have a lot of babies and you can see which babies fly faster and are stronger or whatever and make those. So for me one of the reasons photography is such a powerful medium is because you can do a lot of work. It's a core belief of mine that quantity leads to quality. It's just these two things are not

the same word [laughs] but that you can't have quality without quantity and you can't have quantity without getting more quality.

The second year I did just photography and my photography professor in that class was my humanities professor at Reed. It was originally supposed to be two teachers teaching together, but over the summer they realized they couldn't stand each other and they couldn't be in the room together. So they divided the class in half, sort of randomly, alphabetically I think, and each took half of the class. So I thought, well, in the middle of class I'll switch over to the other guy and learn from two different people. But our teacher, my old humanities teacher Kirk Thompson, he was a monomaniac for photography. I went to his house once, opened his refrigerator, and inside his refrigerator were only two things: film and ketchup.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: He eats film? Well, that doesn't matter. He doesn't need to eat; he's got ketchup, that's good enough. The rest is film. He made everybody work really hard and he had a lot of ideas about photography that were kind of goofy, but I think in any class that's part of the dynamic, that there's somebody who, everything they say is kind of wrong. And it kind of focuses the class on okay, that's wrong, but why is that wrong? [Laughs] It's more powerful educationally than just having everybody agree, oh yes, the Cultural Revolution is a wonderful thing. Blah, blah, blah. Whatever the party line is. In this case, the guy who, most of the things he said was wrong, was the teacher. But that's actually even more powerful because the most powerful experience you can have as a student is when you're right and the teacher is wrong.

There's nothing more powerful than that and you will always remember it. If that happens to you when you're a student, you will remember that on your dying day. That will be your Rosebud thing that you say when you were dying. I was right, the teacher was wrong. I think there's a richness to that, but also the main thing is that he just made everybody work really hard. He made you put out quantity, quantity, quantity. By the middle of the year the worst student in our random half was better than the best student in the other random half and so it was like this perfect science experiment. Let's take one variable, how hard do you make people work? The other class, everything else is better. Turns out everything else is meaningless compared to how much do you work. So anyway, sorry. I got a little long-winded there, but that's my job.

Q: You could apply that to all sorts of things. Interesting.

Rauschenberg: Yes, yes. So anyway, that's the thing I love about photography, is that I could go out and take a hundred pictures today. Particularly now that I'm digital, I don't have to develop film in between. I can look at them tonight, go out and take a hundred more pictures tomorrow based on what I did today, look at those tomorrow night, and go out the next day and take a hundred more. So there's this tremendous evolutionary power available in photography that I think is really great. There are lots of different ways of doing photography. I saw people work in studios with fancy lighting, like you don't see here, but is here. There are all kinds of different ways to work. But this way, where you just go out and take pictures and take pictures—the fruit fly method if I can call it that—is very powerful and it's something that keeps you from ever having that blank sheet of paper and the typewriter. If you say well, okay, I just had a show and I just finished showing my pictures from Tanzania or whatever it is, but I've got three different

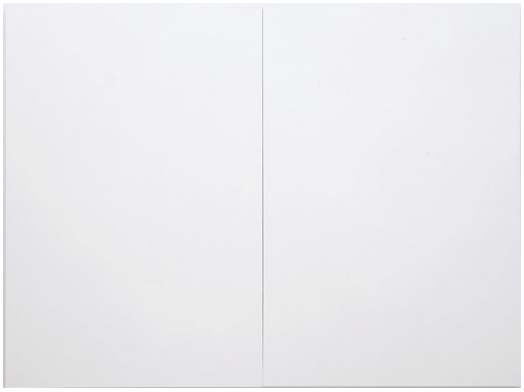
things that I'm working on that are all kind of showing promise and they seem to be flying faster than the other fruit flies and I'd better see what's going on with those three different series. It's a great way to work, I think.

And of course I'm used to my father. My father would work in series but he would not approach any given artwork saying I have an idea for what this is going to be. My mother does that. My mother figures out what her painting is going to be and then executes it. That's not to say things don't change while she's doing that. Basically she figures out what her painting is going to be and she makes a painting that looks like what she figured out. Whereas my father would come up to a canvas or a door skin or a big piece of Plexiglas or a big piece of metal or whatever it was and just go into conversation with it and start working and see what happened and keep going until it evolved into something that was right. My father did photography from the beginning of his life as an artist and these wonderful pictures that he did at Black Mountain and other things. I feel like his way of working is based very much on what the camera teaches you. It's very much a photographer's point of view. It's like well, how can you put an old chair and a necktie and everything in a painting? How can you say that's suitable for art? Well, this is what cameras do. They look at a bunch of things and they don't say well, this is the Queen of England, that's important. This is a fire hydrant, that's not important. This is the chair, that's not important. This is Winston Churchill, he's important. Cameras don't do that; they think everything is equal. If I take a picture of you with a coffee can next to you, the coffee can is as likely to dominate the picture as you are.

Q: Especially since I love coffee.

Rauschenberg: There you go. So I think my father's way of working, that it's about, let's look at the real world. Let's actually look at it. Look at it in its particularity. If he has a chair in his painting, it's not a brand new chair that he went and bought from the store. It's not a generic chair. It's a particular chair that when you look at it you feel all the bottoms that sat in it. Everything has that sense of detail that a photograph has, the little details that are handles to hang onto. That's why when people come up to a painting of my dad's, there's not a meaning in there that they're supposed to get. There's a whole series of conversational openings. This painting has five thousand conversational openings based on what is your experience, what is your mood today, and you might come up to a Combine painting that you've looked at fifty times, that you looked at yesterday. But you're a slightly different person today than you were yesterday and you're a different person now than you were an hour ago. And suddenly, a part of it that wasn't speaking to you, you start in a conversation with that. The same way that, if I see you three times in a week, we're not going to repeat the same conversations to each other three times. We have more interesting, different things to say; that would be too boring. I think for my father, it was the same thing. Okay, let's use this power of the detail to be a shared thing that will start a conversation. And in the artwork by itself, it's like if a tree falls in a forest, no one hears it, did it make a sound? If the artwork is just sitting in the warehouse, it's incomplete. It's completed by you coming and looking at it and going into conversation with it. He made pieces that made this very explicit. He has a piece called *Soundings*, it's just a big mirror until you actually start talking to the painting. Until you make noise and then your sound triggers light bulbs that are behind the two-way mirror and there are all these chairs actually. There are all these images that appear based on what sounds you're making. That piece actually lives in Cologne, Germany so

I'm sure Germans are very proper and they don't tend to make sound when they come into the gallery. So I think they may have to sometimes be prompted. I'm sure there are many people who just think, I wonder why this artist did this big mirror? But of course, my father also did *White Paintings* [1951] [laughs] so they might think that was the reason.



Robert Rauschenberg
White Painting [two panel], 1951
Oil on canvas
72 x 96 inches (182.9 x 243.8 cm) overall
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

But that was the idea of the *White Painting* too; it's like the painting is a stage for things to happen on, for light to land on. I think the sense that it would be something that's complete by itself has never been really part of anything he did.

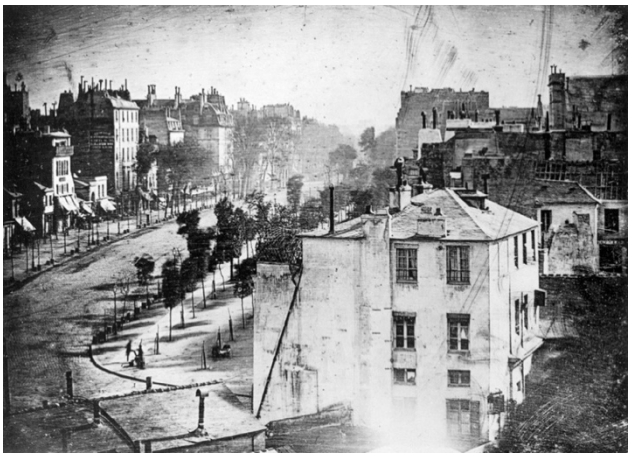
Q: Wonderful. So let's think now where to move next. Oh yes, I wanted to ask you. Now we're on your father, so let me think a minute. But I do want to go a little further, push a little further with you and your own work, to how you became enamored of [Eugène] Atget.

Rauschenberg: Oh yes, well. He's a very powerful photographer. It's funny, the work seems like it would be subtle, but when I was teaching at Evergreen, I did history of photography classes where you're trying to cover the whole history of photography in two semesters. I would do from [Louis-Jacques-Mandé] Daguerre to *Life* magazine and then from Robert Frank to the present.

But then I felt like okay, so you don't really ever show more than twenty images by one photographer because you've just got to keep moving. There are a lot of people and I was frustrated by that. So I said okay, I'm going to do a class where I just take ten photographers and we're going to spend a whole three-hour class talking about one photographer. I picked out the ten most powerful, rich, and interesting photographers to talk about and chronologically the first one was Eugène Atget. So I said okay, this is going to be a little hard because he's kind of subtle. I'm going to have a brand new class, they have no shared vocabulary, we've got nothing. We're just going to start with this. But it's a history class; I've got to do them in order. So we'll just see how it works.

I think I held it down to two slide carousels. I have to explain to our younger audience what that is, but one hundred and sixty images, I think I held it to. I started in and I'm changing slides while I kind of give a little biographical background. He wanted to be an actor and he didn't exactly flunk out of acting school, but it's one of these winnowed down things and he got winnowed out. He wasn't in the top twenty-five percent of his class in his second year or whatever and so he decided to be a photographer. So I'm just sort of telling this biographical stuff and we've seen about three slides and one of the students raises her hand, it's like just to go to the bathroom already? What is this? So I call on her and she says, "But these pictures seem to be about eternity." I went okay, I should appreciate this because in my experience as a teacher, I'm never again going to have the experience where someone gets an A three minutes into the first class. [Laughs] And also I don't think I need to worry that this work is too subtle.

His work has a richness of detail that we were talking about before, where you can look at his pictures and say look how they used to make chicken wire. But you can also look at the pictures and think about time. He was interested not in the momentary interesting things that happened in the passing scene. He was not a street photographer; he was not a [Lee] Friedlander kind of a guy or a Garry Winogrand. He was interested in things that were going to stay still long enough that maybe a tree would notice them. [Laughs] It was on that kind of timescale of a tree. So he might have a portrait of somebody, but it would be the madam sitting in front of her place of business or the balloon seller in his regular spot. There's a picture by Daguerre taken out of his studio window of the street and the only person who shows up in it—because he was the only person who stood still long enough—is the guy who is having his shoes shined. So there's this one guy standing there with his foot up like this. Everything else is—there might be some other blurry hints that maybe something happened. Maybe it looked like a water flow, but because we understand how photography is, we know those are people walking by.



Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre
Boulevard du Temple, 1838
Daguerreotype

So for me, the fact that Atget is interested in this longer timeframe and has the emotional richness that that gives to step out. So we talked about photography as being something where

you look through somebody else's eyes, but to actually step out of a human timeframe and say okay, never mind, what am I doing out of today's paper? What am I doing in the book *Don Quixote* [Miguel de Cervantes, 1605/1615]? [Laughs] What are the things that we are creating that have a lasting meaning? That are us reaching out beyond us? You think about the ancient Egyptians, you don't think about them playing dice games. You think about the pyramids and the Sphinx. It doesn't have to be as dramatic as that. He might have a picture of a concierge making a little potted plant garden by the door. But again it's something that's a long-range thing. It's not a chalk drawing on the wall like Helen Levitt did. That's not as interesting to him. It's really what are the things that we do that have a longer aspiration or that have a sense of us fitting into a bigger timeframe I guess I would say.

He went to a garden called [Parc de] Sceaux [France] that was very rundown. It was like royal gardens that were completely overgrown and trees were everywhere. There were all these statues standing around, but there were like old, nasty branches everywhere and all this stuff. He was fascinated by that and he took all these pictures of that. He came back a year later and it was all fixed up. And he took one picture and then left, like okay, this place is wrecked for me. Because it had that sense of this is what we want it to look like at the moment, it didn't have that sense that you had from when he was there before of being able to—like Diane Arbus—you could see the striving to make something grand that will stand forever. But you could also see nature having its say about that as well. And there was this temporal richness to that that he didn't find when everything was tidied up and the way it was supposed to be. And this is the thing about Arbus and nobody understands Arbus very much unfortunately. Although people finally appreciate her, thirty-two years after she died. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art did a big

retrospective [*Diane Arbus Revelations*, 2003–04]. But her work was about looking at somebody and seeing simultaneously the image that they wanted to project to you and how they actually are. And to understand somebody, either one of those two things by itself is insufficient. But those two things together, it's like seeing in stereo. If you see through two different angles, you now get a three-dimensional picture.

Eugène Atget
Parc de Sceaux, Mars, 8 h. matin, 1925
Gelatin silver printing-out-paper print
7 1/16 x 8 13/16 inches (17.9 x 22.4 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

There was always this sort of myth in portrait photography that you take a picture of somebody and you capture their soul. And it is possible to do it. Arbus did it. [Laughs]

Q: I was about to say.

Rauschenberg: It's a small list. [Laughs]

Q: A small list.

Rauschenberg: And to say okay, this is a major genre and here's what you're doing, when only three people in the history of photography have actually accomplished it. That's kind of tough. It's like saying, what is running? Well, running is running a four-minute mile. Well that's not a very good definition because you're leaving out a lot of people who are running. We need a different definition. But I think to have that sort of three-dimensional portrait of the city of Paris and its environs is what Atget did that was so remarkable and so amazing. I think the idea that you could talk about a city without showing virtually any of its inhabitants; yes, you got the balloon seller. You have a few. But that was a very wild idea. That people had to stop and think. But I think if there's a way that you're going to invite people in to sort of snoop around on all of those details that are handles for them to grab onto, if there's a person there, you don't tend to snoop around at somebody. I say this maybe because I'm a man. Maybe if you're a woman, you're used to people looking at your anatomy more closely in a casual setting than they ought to. But I think there's an invitation to try to figure out for yourself what's going on and to figure out what's important in the picture, if you take away the thing that people would assume was important. If you take the Queen of England out of the picture, now anybody can tell that the fire hydrant is important, if I can continue that metaphor.

Q: Beautiful. So I would also love to hear you talk about going there yourself and re-photographing the spots of Atget or similar environmental spots in 1997 and '98, and how your whole family was in Europe at the time. I think that's a great story.

Rauschenberg: Well, I was in Paris in '89 and I went to a park that he photographed a lot, [Parc de] Saint-Cloud. I'm walking around in the park and I'm photographing, of course, but I

suddenly come upon a picture that I know really well that's still standing there. It's a gatepost that has a spiral detail on it and I was like well, you're still standing here posing for the picture, but that's like seventy-five to one hundred years ago. [Laughs] The photographer's dead, everybody's dead, and you're still standing on stage in costume with your makeup on. Who else is doing that around here? Again because this is something you can do with him. You can't do this with Garry Winogrand because the person who is passing by with a monkey on their shoulder, they're gone. They're not there a hundred years later.

Christopher Rauschenberg
Saint-Cloud, 1998
from the series *Rephotographing Atget*
Photo: Courtesy Christopher Rauschenberg

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But because he was looking at things. What are the things that are on this slower timeframe? Many of them are not gone. And because Paris, being the city that it is, they don't just tear things down willy-nilly like New York does. Here's the most beautiful building in America, okay, tear it down.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: And dump it in the Meadowlands marsh. So they don't do that, although they did take out Les Halles market and put in a horrible underground shopping mall. Other than that, they've been pretty good.

So I decided I should do a project and I've found a couple other places that were in Saint-Cloud that were still his pictures. I said I should come back and do a big project, there's probably a lot here. I said okay, at some point I'll have a logical time to do this. In '97 and '98, my wife had gone back for further schooling and she was getting advanced nursing stuff. So I said this is it and I went to Paris for three weeks, I photographed all day, every day, as long as it was light out. Came home, sorted through those for six months, and went back to Paris for three weeks. Photographed all day, every day, came back home, looked at those for six months. Went back over, photographed for three more weeks, all day, every day. And I ended up re-photographing about five hundred places that he did. I don't know exactly because I would shoot the same ones over and over again. Because he lived there but I didn't. So I couldn't go and sort of say okay, this is the exact light that he had, the exact time of day, all this stuff. It wasn't that kind of a project. And in the intervening decades Paris went from a city that had horse-drawn carts and a subway to a city that has cars parked all over it. So he has these pictures that have this beautiful sense of space and in his pictures, you feel like you're standing in the picture because he gives you a place to stand, if I can say that. There's a ground that you stand on, there's a deep space that sort of pulls you into the picture very typically. There's a re-photographic project called the *Rephotographic Survey Project* that Ellen Manchester, Mark Klett, and JoAnn Verburg did.

They took the pictures of the West that [William Henry] Jackson, [Timothy H.] O'Sullivan, all these guys did that led to our having national parks; when these pictures were shown to Congress, they created national parks. But they re-photographed those pictures and they did it very mathematically, where exactly was the lens and exactly what were the swings and tilts on the view camera, to get it exactly. Which meant sometimes, not very often, but sometimes they were shooting straight into the side of a car. And they sort of said so be it. Or shooting into a bush that's now in the way.

But for me, I didn't want that. The thing that I was interested in, the question that I was asking with this project was, if Atget were around now instead of a hundred years ago, could he have done the same body of work? Was this something that could have only been at that time or could he have seen that there now? So basically I would go back and shoot something that I shot six months ago. I would shoot it again and I would go back and whatever. I don't know exactly how many, but it was roughly five hundred. Then I went through those and put them together in the sort of logical way.

But starting from the first day that I was doing it on the first trip, I did something that I didn't know I was going to do. But as soon as I was there, I started doing it. Which is to look over and say well, there's no Atget picture of that, but I bet if he were standing there now, there would be. So from the very first day the project immediately popped up a second part, which I called "In Atget's Shoes" or just "Atget's Shoes," where's it's like okay, I'm re-photographing, but I am also saying if my question is if he were here today could he make the same body of work, why would I assume it would be all only in those exact same places that it was a hundred years

before? Why wouldn't I say well and he would like this? So there'd been a number of other people who have re-photographed Atget; I know of at least seven actually. And I don't know of anybody else who made just complete fake Atget pictures. [Note: "In Atget's Shoes" is a section in Christopher Rauschenberg, *Paris Changing: Revisiting Eugène Atget's Paris*, 2007]

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: I think I'm the only one who did that. Maybe other people did it, but I'm the only one I know of who did that. But it was fascinating to me and of course what ended up happening is that some of the ones I did as fake Atget pictures—

Princeton Architectural Press published a book that's actually about to come out in paperback now [note: paperback edition of *Paris Changing: Revisiting Eugène Atget's Paris*, 2016]. It's been a very well-selling book and it's sort of like saying me and LeBron [Raymone] James can lick anybody.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: Me and Atget can do well. Yes, well of course. But the—I lost my train of thought there. Oh yes, so when I went through to get the photo originals of Atget to reproduce for the book, originals, copy prints. I was going through the archives of the Bibliothèque nationale [de France, Paris] and the combined archives of the Musée Carnavalet [Paris] and the other museums have a combined photo archive. And I came across some of the pictures that I

shot as fake Atget pictures, which turned out to be re-photographs. [Laughs] I was right, he was interested in that.

Q: Oh wow.

Rauschenberg: So that was really fascinating to me and I loved that. Of course, even if nothing came of it, even if I took all the negatives and threw them away at the end, to have the chance to study with somebody. I've said photography is like looking through somebody's eyes. But to walk around and say oh, why did he crop that off? And why did he stand exactly here? Well, he stood here because this is a doorway so it could get two feet farther back. [Laughs] But just to understand what he was doing; why was he shooting so many verticals? Well because he wanted the building. Even in the doorway, you can only get that far back. That's sort of talking about practical things, but to understand philosophically too. To walk around and look at the city and see it the way he saw it. It's like being able to study with somebody. If you were a painter and you got to study with Matisse, you would want to do it. And that's why when you go into a museum, more in Europe than here, you'll see somebody who's got an easel set up. They've got a little permission badge and they're painting a [Hieronymus] Bosch painting. They're making a copy of it. And it's not about wouldn't it be more efficient to take a picture of it? It's about I want to understand what he did, I want to go over it piece by piece and understand what the brush strokes were and understand all that stuff. It's a way of studying with somebody who is moving you deeply but is gone.

Q: Beautiful. I had a couple of questions. I think in the interview you did in *Lens Culture*, you also spoke about how someone prompted you to understand that it wasn't just those two things that you were doing there. That a third thing was happening, which was you were reinterpreting Atget. If you could talk about that a little bit—that your own process was an important part of what happened in the end.

Rauschenberg: Yes and one of the things that I had to do—I had to say okay, he's doing this with a big view camera, with a full plate camera, a roughly 8-by-10 camera, and on a tripod. Am I going to do that or am I going to walk around shooting this with a 35-millimeter camera? I had an architectural lens that could adjust. Because as everybody who has ever tried to take a picture of a building knows, it goes like this because you're tilting up. But if you keep the camera pointed straight at the building, then everything's straight. If you have a lens that can lift up like this, everything stays straight because you're not tilting back at any point. But you're letting the light kind of come down at an angle because you moved the lens up this way. So you can do that also with a 35-millimeter camera. You get a special lens that you can crank it over, crank it up, or crank it sideways. So I did that and I decided it was okay for me to do that. I did bring along a tripod the first trip that I went, but the first time I tried to use the tripod, a policeman came up to me and said, "You're not allowed to take pictures here." I said, "What do you mean? Everybody's taking pictures." I'm standing in Paris completely surrounded by tourists; all of them are taking pictures. He said, "No, you're not allowed to take pictures." I finally figured it out and said, "Well, is it the tripod?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Okay, well where— I need permission?" "Yes, you need permission." "Where do I get permission?" "You have to go back

into the city and negotiate with the city based on what is the financial reward of what you're doing as a professional photographer and negotiate a cut for the city."

[INTERRUPTION]

Rauschenberg: So they said, "No, you're not allowed to photograph." I said, "Well is it because of the tripod?" "Yes." I said, "What do I have to do to get permission to photograph with a tripod?" They said I had to go into an office in the city on a weekday and negotiate with them a fee, which is based on how profitable your pictures are going to be. That was too much of a pain in the neck. I am not going to be doing that. So I just didn't use the tripod and just photographed everything. To try to do it with a view camera, there's no way I could have re-photographed that many of his places. Each one would have taken hours instead of a few minutes.

One of the things about re-photographing his work, not only is there a great motivation to do it, but the pictures tend to be titled with the street address. [Laughs] How am I ever going to find this place? Oh, there's the address. [Laughs] So I had a book that was published by Gingko Press that was like the size of a paving stone [*Atget Paris*, 1992]. [Laughs] The pictures were organized by arrondissement, by what section of the city they were in. I basically had a fanny pack that this book fit in and I would say okay, I'm going to go to this place, this place, this place, this place. I could do it in a logical, geographic way and go. And maybe I would go there and it was nothing, it wasn't interesting. So I would just keep going to the next place. Because the city of Paris has grown quite a bit, what used to be the outskirts of Paris in Atget's time—he

might have a picture of shepherd and sheep, well there's not a shepherd and a sheep there anymore.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: So in general, I'm in the close end, sort of center of town because that's what changed the least. But occasionally I would go to a further out one, like okay, this is beautiful and was it there? Sometimes it was. But basically I could just go and it was—he's a photographer who the motivation is very high to do this, the reward is very high, but it's also pretty easy to do. If you want to photograph his portraits of trees that he did in Bois de Boulogne, you're not going to be able to find the right trees. But if I photograph a street scene, it is the right trees. Even though it's seventy-five years later, it's the same trees. Now about two or three years after I did this project, they had a huge windstorm in Europe. They talked about taking out all these hundred-year-old trees. So I might have done it in the nick of time, tree-wise. [Laughs] But also it was just a wonderful experience to go and sort of take not only my Atget part of my way of seeing, but I also have a Lee Friedlander part of my way of seeing it. Atget is sort of the least tricky photographer, the most straightforward photographer, and Friedlander is wonderfully tricky. [Laughs] Friedlander at one point recently, he couldn't walk around. He had foot surgery or something and people started sending him flowers. So he decided he was going to photograph flowers. What does he photograph? He photographs vases full of flower stems.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: In the history of art nobody ever photographed the stems. Or painted the stems as a project. It's a great book. He's always finding a different way to look at it.

I had this experience when I was in Havana for *ROCI CUBA* [1988]. I was there and I met a Cuban photographer and he didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Spanish, but we were understanding each other a bit. At one point he pointed to himself and he said, "Robert Frank." And he pointed to his wife and said the name of another photographer; I don't remember now who it was, her contact, her model, or guide, if you could put it that way. So I pointed to myself and said, "Atget, Friedlander." [Laughs] And he said okay, okay, we understand each other.

But of course it's a funny thing to say you stand at the point where Atget and Friedlander meet because they completely don't meet. You have the trickiest guy and the least tricky guy. [Laughs] So one of the things that was interesting for me was to say I'm bringing my Friedlander side to this party, but it's not that kind of a party. [Laughs]

Q: Say more what you mean by that, in terms of the outcome, in terms of you how did it.

Rauschenberg: For example, in the Panthéon [Paris]. The Panthéon was built as a church but now it's a place where the heroes of France are memorialized and buried, and they have statues for them and all that stuff. I did a picture in the Panthéon where one of the statues is a general and is stepping forward. I framed it so he's stepping into the picture, stepping in from the edge of the frame. Then I looked at that during my "go home for six months and look at everything." I

looked at that and I said, “Atget doesn’t have things coming in from the edge of the frame.” There’s the idea that the edge of the frame is this active member of the jazz ensemble, if I can put it that way. That’s not his way. That’s Friedlander. Let me take that out.

And I photographed a doorway to a café with two doves over it, which had some chairs leaning against it. I photographed it first with the same cropping that Atget had and then I said but now these chairs—I’m cutting these chairs in half. I have to step back another step from where he stood because he doesn’t want to cut those chairs in half. [Laughs] His pictures have a sense that what you’re seeing is a whole. That what you’re seeing is an entirety. That you’re not thinking about him cropping or anything, or cutting something off or anything like that. That’s just one example. But that’s something that I had to kind flush out of my system. And there was a temptation, particularly because things change over time, there’s a temptation.

One of the pictures that I did end up putting in the book is a storefront and there’s a big sort of Sphinx carved in stone up above this shop front. I went back now and there’s a billboard that said blah, blah, blah, buy our soap—cultural patrimony. Underneath this soap billboard that says cultural patrimony is some cultural patrimony. [Laughs] There’s a Sphinx under there. So I shot it; that was kind of okay. I’m getting a little wiseacre there. [Laughs] I’m not coming from that place of just sincere—I don’t know exactly what to say. Sincere straightforward admiration and love for the place. And that was tricky to get to and that was valuable to do.

Eugène Atget
Hôtel des abbés de Royaumont, 4 rue du Jour, 1907

Christopher Rauschenberg
Hôtel des abbés de Royaumont, 4 rue du Jour, 1997
from the series *Rephotographing Atget*
Photo: Courtesy Christopher Rauschenberg

I will also say that going into that project, maybe between five to ten percent of my pictures were verticals. I recently had a show of pictures where I think I had three horizontals and all the rest were verticals. [Laughs] I just shoot a lot more verticals. Partly I'm used to looking at—he shot a lot of verticals for some practical reasons—but I just kind of got used to that format, that way of seeing. It's something that he kind of showed me how to do when he was taking me around—even though he was dead—and showing me what to do.

Q: The theme reminds me a bit of one of the themes of your father's work too. Instead of using photography to illustrate, using it to discover—to move from illustration to discovery.

Rauschenberg: Yes. It's interesting. Having said earlier that there are a lot of different kinds of photography and certainly there's a way of doing photography that has to do with you come up

with an idea and you get everybody together and you act it out and photograph it and you light it, and you basically are illustrating something that you already understand. I don't mean to say that you're not making discoveries in that process too, but the nature of photography, I think, in its most pure form is not so much that to me; that's photography plus something else. Of course people working in Photoshop now, you're doing things later. Or I'm going to drop this person into this background. But for me the purest form of photography is to go out in the world with an open mind and see what's there and take pictures of what's there. And it's really about discovery.

I talk to people a lot. I do these portfolio reviews where a non-profit will bring together a whole bunch of photography curators and book publishers, and pay for their plane tickets and hotel rooms and food, by charging photographers a fee that covers those expenses. In exchange for paying that fee, the photographers get a twenty-minute appointment with, in the case of FotoFest or Photolucida—FotoFest is the original one that started this—over the four-day period they get twenty-minute appointments with eighteen different curators to talk about their work. So I end up talking to people about their work a lot. One of the things that I say to people is, there's a difference between illustration, to show what you know, and discovery and figuring something out. Even if your project starts out as an illustration, if your project ends up being the same thing that your original idea was, I think it's a failed project. If you say I'm looking for something and you go to the drawer where it's supposed to be and sure enough it's there, what have you discovered? Nothing.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But if you go to that drawer and you say well, the thing I'm looking for is not there, but look what's here. [Laughs] Okay. Now that's a different level of experience. That's putting things into a creative realm that the other isn't; just, oh yes, my watch is where it's supposed to be on the desktop, is not a creative act.

I think having talked earlier about the sort of fruit fly power of photography, that you can do something and look at it and do it again, and look at it and do it again, look at it, do it again. That only works if you're not sticking to your original idea, if you're not staying wedded to that. So if you have something that has a superpower of evolution and you don't use that superpower, at that point you're really only Clark Kent. You're not Superman, you're just Clark Kent. And yes, that's the same guy, but [laughs] use your power. Use your power.

Q: Beautiful. So let me give you a question that may be a bit conceptual, but I'm interested in it. Obviously you're a fantastic teacher.

Rauschenberg: Not anymore. I fired myself. I taught for fourteen years and said okay, that's enough of that.

Q: [Laughs] But I mean in the way that you speak, you're a teacher. So if you had to make selections of your father's artwork, especially in regard to his use of photography, how would you construct a class? How would you teach a class on your father?

Rauschenberg: Oh, that's an interesting idea. Well, one thing I'll say is that when the Schirmer/Mosel book came out of his early photographs I looked at it and I immediately saw something which I hadn't ever thought about before. Which is that the early work was very much about him and his life; a lot of the pictures are made in the studio and are the people who are the closest people to him. My mom and Jasper. And when he was taking pictures in the outside world, he would take a picture of something that looked like one of his artworks.

Robert Rauschenberg
Sue + Janet–Outer Island, Conn., 1949
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: It's like he would take a picture of something because gee, wish I'd made that, that's a good one.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: John Szarkowski did a book and exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art many, many years ago. It was called *Mirrors and Windows* and it was about dividing photographers into people whose work was primarily about looking in at themselves and understanding themselves, and people whose work was primarily about looking out at the outside world and understanding the outside world. What I realized when I saw the Schirmer/Mosel book of the early work is that the early photography is mirror work and the later photography is windows. But the paintings are too. If you look at the Combine paintings, they're full of his mother, his sister, my mother, me. They're full of all these things that are about looking in and about understanding your own self. And then, as with the photography, it turns around. Suddenly the paintings aren't full of Dora, they're full of John [Fitzgerald] Kennedy. [Laughs] And this transition from being somebody who is looking at and understanding his own experience to somebody who, after a certain point, described himself as a reporter. My work is about looking at the outside world and reporting on the outside world. Of course I'm sure the *New York Times* would have not known how to publish his stories, [laughs] but I think that's a really rich and interesting thing. So that's one of the things that I would talk about.

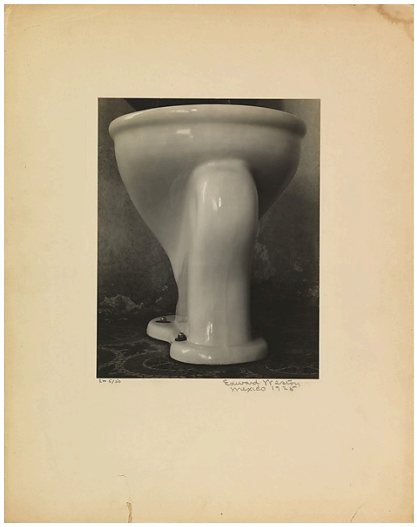
It's pretty rare for somebody to make that switch I think, if I think of other photographers. One of the interesting things about Atget, to get back to Atget, is that he stands kind of at the corner of both. He does both in this perfect equal balance, which is one of the reasons he's fascinating to everybody. But I think also I would want to talk about this thing that I said earlier. That I think everything about his work is informed by what the camera teaches you—that the camera teaches you to look at ordinary objects and to appreciate them. My father was very interested in [Marcel] Duchamp and there's an aspect of Duchamp that's—with Duchamp everything is a play on

something because Duchamp is never on this—there's no overlapping to an Atget and Duchamp. He's not on the straightforward level at all. [Laughs] But to have the readymades, there's a way as a photographer to look at that and say yes, that bottle rack is beautiful. And to take it in a sort of straight way. I think it's one of the things that I am curious about and if I had kept teaching photography longer, I would have tried to figure this out better. The teacher always has to be learning, that's a basic principle I think. The teacher can't be doing a class where they already knew everything at the beginning of the class. That's like a project that comes out the same at the end. Anyway, but I think there's a relationship where Duchamp is showing at [Alfred] Stieglitz's gallery. [Note: Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession commonly known as 291, New York] Stieglitz is showing this hackneyed Photo-Secession work, if I can get myself in trouble with some photography historians there. He's showing not-cutting-edge photography and cutting-edge modern art. I think there's a synergy of misunderstanding that Paul Strand looks at Duchamp's readymades and then goes out and shoots the white picket fence. He could have shot the white picket fence before, but I think there's a taking Duchamp at face value, which is not the correct thing to do, that enriched the photography world around the Photo-Secession.

Also I think the nature of photography maybe was tempting to Duchamp and inspiring the readymades. I think there's an interplay there. My dad bought a bottle rack and got Duchamp to sign it [note: Rauschenberg purchased it from the exhibition *Art and the Found Object* (1959–60), in which he was also represented; it is dated 1960 when Duchamp inscribed and signed the work]. If I'm right and there's a photographer's point of view behind everything, then I think that it would make sense that he would be drawn to that. The *Bottle Rack* [1914] is the most beautiful of the readymades. In terms of just the actual object itself. It's the one that a photographer would

pick. The urinal, it was okay [*Fountain*, 1917], but Edward Weston's toilet that he photographed was better [*Excusado*, 1925].

Marcel Duchamp
Bottlerack, 1961 (replica of 1914 original)
Galvanized iron
19 5/8 x 16 1/8 inches (49.8 x 41 cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Gift of Jacqueline, Paul, and Peter Matisse in memory of their mother, Alexina Duchamp, 1998
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp



Edward Weston
Excusado, 1925
Gelatin silver print
Image: 9 1/2 x 7 9/16 inches (24.2 x 19.2 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: So yes, I think there's a lot of stuff to say and I think it would be really interesting to have a course that would ask, what is the interplay? What is the going back and forth? The *Mirrors and Windows* book that I talked about earlier is one of the few books that I've ever seen that is a photography book that includes my father. And it included a couple of his

lithographs—but to say yes, this is photography. It may not look exactly like Jacob [August] Riis, but it's photography. [Laughs]

I think photography as a field is tremendously understudied and under-understood, if I can get too far under there. I have friends who went to school and studied with [William] Bill Jay, who was a photo curator and writer, a very important photographer curator and writer. They said every five minutes in class, Bill Jay would stop and say, "And this would be a great thing to write a paper on," and then go back to what he was talking about. "And this would be a great thing to write a paper on, nobody's written about this." No matter what step you take, you're stepping into unknown territory because it's so poorly mapped. It's kind of shocking, but that's just how it is. Nobody cared about photography so nobody did anything about it. And nobody cares that much about art criticism. There's not that much and what there is, is not in photography. [Laughs]

John Szarkowski, he wrote beautifully about photography. He wrote amazingly. There's a book, *Looking at Photographs*[*: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, 1973], a hundred photographs from the museum's collection with a hundred less-than-a-page short essays. Absolutely brilliant. There's so much to say and so few people have said any of it.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: So I am hopeful at some point that things will start getting figured out. But what we're doing right now, Blue Sky, because the gallery is forty years old now and there's a bunch

of work that we showed back in the seventies and eighties that everybody's forgotten about, including the photographers who did it. They might not have literally forgotten about it, but they're not promoting it anymore, they don't have it on their websites. And we've gone back and we're doing a whole series of print-on-demand monographs from earlier shows. So we published one this month that was a show we did in 1976. Well, 1976 is forty years ago. If nobody published that work between then and now, nobody was ever going to unless we did it. There's a photographer, Karl Baden, and we did two shows of his work in the eighties. Great shows, they were such powerful work. Nobody ever published them. He didn't have them on his website. I emailed him and I said, "Look, we want to do a book of these two bodies of work." And he emailed back, "Well, that's a good idea, I have to make prints, I don't have any prints of them." So at what point was this important work going to be remembered? Maybe no point. And if things are very poorly studied or if they're studied much later, the things that were important at the time—I was a young photographer in the seventies, as were a whole lot of photographers. That's the big baby boom in photography, that moment, and one of the most important photographers to us was [Leslie Robert] Les Krims. An absolutely important photographer, inspired everybody. He did these little books of projects; before that, anybody who had a book, it was like a lifetime achievement book. But the idea that you just had this idea to do *The Incredible Case of the Stack O'Wheats Murders* [1972] or *The Little People of America* [1971] or *The Deerslayers* [1972]. Just do a book of a project; nobody ever did that before. It sounds stupid now, you can't imagine it, but nobody ever did it. So it was very inspiring and he's kind of a pain in the neck. He's a difficult person and his work is sexist in a certain way. You can't tell if he's making fun of sexism or if he is sexist and this is the edge with all his work because you can't tell, is this spoof or does he actually think that? Of course they're probably both, but

[laughs] anyway. I think there's a richness in that and he's just going to get left out. And if Sandra [S.] Phillips at SFMOMA doesn't like that work, he's going to get left out because she's the one, she did the Arbus show, she did Helen Levitt.

Helen Levitt was an incredibly difficult person to deal with so nobody dealt with her. One of the most important photographers. When I was doing my class I talked about earlier, where I just picked the ten most important photographers and spent a whole three-hour class doing each one. My three-hour class on Helen Levitt—the first time I did it, I just did it, here is the work, I'm going to say what I say. Okay, then I did that class again. So I said I didn't want to repeat my same thing that I did two years ago. Let me look at my twelve history of photography books and see what they say about Helen Levitt and change it up, make it more interesting for me, and say something different. Between the twelve books there were one-and-a-half paragraphs. Virtually nothing. Two of them had images reproduced. This is one of the ten most important photographers. Sure, she's a pain in the neck. Sure, you had to struggle to get the reproduction permission, but it doesn't matter. You can't say [Pablo] Picasso's a pain in the neck and leave him out of the history of art. You just can't. But in photography, they do.

Q: Fascinating. So the Foundation gives money to people who work in photography? Well, I'm thinking of Wendy. How generally would you—

Rauschenberg: Wendy. We supported Wendy's project. There's the original project of the Foundation; when Bob started the Foundation a little over twenty years ago, his original project, which was the main project of the Foundation, was the Lab School in Washington. This is a

school for kids with learning disabilities and they use art to teach everything. Art, role-playing, the way you memorize facts is by having a password that you need to come into the classroom and the password changes. The password might be Pithecanthropus erectus for the Cave Club [laughs]. But that's just this week, next week you've got to memorize something else. It's all very smart and you don't sit down and have a written test, you play a Trivial Pursuit kind of a board game. What's Trivial Pursuit? They ask you a question and you have to answer it. It's a test! But people like Trivial Pursuit, it's a game, it's fun. It's not a test; it's a game. [Laughs] So everything is like that. It's about role-playing when they study the Renaissance; it's like the teacher is Lorenzo de' Medici and all the other students are different artists and they all wear a little red artist hat in the classroom. They all paint a *Mona Lisa* [Leonardo da Vinci, ca. 1503–19] and they all do this and grind up cochineal bugs to make red [laughs]. It's amazing, they teach everything that way. You're not memorizing as many facts, but you're getting a deep understanding from trying it on. This is this try it on thing. Maybe a conventional way of teaching would tell you more facts about the Gilded Age. But if in your class you were Henry Ford and your friend over there was playing a labor leader, you're going to understand things in a way that a person sitting in a regular class reading fifty pages of a textbook and trying to memorize everything is not.

Anyway, so that was one of the original projects. We wanted to have Wendy Ewald come to one of the Lab School annual gatherings that we do. We do these teacher trainings where we bring in thirty teachers from around the country and they see the Lab School stuff. The Lab School does some sort of demo with them about their method, what they call the Academic Club method, which is Cave Club, Renaissance Club, all these things I'm talking about. Actually Cave Club

they don't do anymore, they rotated that out. But I loved it so much. The teacher sat on a stone throne, was a wise elder, they had a fake fire in the middle that students sat around. I loved Cave Club, but that's beside the point. We wanted Wendy to come and talk about what she was doing with photography with the kids and how she was using photography. So Christy MacLear, the executive director of the Foundation, and I met with her one time when Wendy and I were both in New York. (Christy lives here.) It didn't really work out for her to come to that Lab School workshop. She had something else, a schedule conflict or something. And then we were getting up to go and we just said, "Oh Wendy, what are you working on nowadays?" And she told us about this Tanzania thing. Both Christy and I, our eyes got big and we said, "Well, don't forget to ask us for money." [Laughs] But with our grant making with the Foundation, we're interested in supporting art and supporting issues that are important in the world, as was my dad. And as a group, we had to say okay, how are we going to reconcile this? We had some philanthropy committee members that said the amount of money that we have at this point—because we have a lot of paintings, we don't have much money, and you can't sell the paintings too fast or you destroy their value—the amount of money we have is not enough money to save the world, but it's a lot of money in the art world. [Laughs] And we said yes, but this is my dad's Foundation and he wasn't only interested in art. He was interested in stepping in with whatever resources he had to help solve the problems of the world. So we ended up—let's say that fifty percent of our philanthropy is going to be art-related, fifty percent of it is going to be about helping the problems of the world, and fifty percent of it is going to be the overlap of the two. [Laughs] We're not taking out a ruler and measuring every project, but just as a general, consensual framework. That twenty-five percent of our things are only going to be problem-solving, issue-related things. Twenty-five percent are just going to be supporting art stuff that's not about the

world. But the big chunk of it, the fifty percent, is going to be in the overlap, where we're bringing art to bear on trying to solve these problems in some combination.

Q: Beautiful.

Rauschenberg: So anyway, so that's where we're at with that. And that was why we brought in Wendy. Wendy is a perfect example of that overlap. She's saying okay, it's not just about having art experience, it's about these kids needing to learn in a richer way, where they learn how to synergize and not just memorize, and art is going to be the tool to do that. So that's in the sweet spot of our philanthropy.

Q: Yes, that's beautiful. There's something, I've been noticing it since you've been describing the importance of process and not knowing what you're going to find. I'm just going to comment on it. Both in your father's work and talking about your own work, I sense this movement towards the future all the time. This sense of time passing, this sense of urgency, of response to the world, and I'm just wondering if you too think that's a theme. If you think it's somehow relevant to some of the projects that you and your father were each interested in, something that might connect you—the sense of action in the work, transformed in the world.

Rauschenberg: Yes, people are complicated and they're made of all different traits, but if you were going to say okay, pick one trait as the main trait for your dad [laughs] it's curiosity. If you asked anybody that question, every single person would say curiosity. He was driven by a curiosity that was his superpower, if I can go back to that metaphor. And curiosity has you

looking into the future. That's the nature of it. It's about what will happen if I do this? Well, what will happen is the future. [Laughs] He brought that curiosity into his art making, but also into his interpersonal relationships. There's a great story, which I don't know if it's a true story or not—this is the thing about hanging around with creative people. I don't care if it really happened; it's a true story. [Laughs] When Jasper was doing the flag paintings and they were both having studios in the same building, Bob was watching Jasper doing these flag paintings and they were encaustic. He's heating up this wax with color in it and putting it on with a tongue depressor kind of thing. Bob started in on Jasper saying, "Oh, that looks so sensual. I just want to see what that feels like. Let me put on just one thing." "No Bob, no. No, no, no, Bob, no, down Bob." "No, it looks—I just want to try it, oh, it looks so sensual. It must feel great, just to understand the wax on there." "No, down Bob, down, down." Anyway, he finally wore him out, and Jasper said, "Okay, you can put one thing on it." So Bob, he came and carefully put one red thing in the middle of a white stripe.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: And then probably had to run out the door.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: And to me, it's like I don't know if that really happened or not, but it's a true story because it's about being driven in your interpersonal relationships by curiosity too. What if I did this? [Laughs] What will happen then? [Laughs]

Q: How did that translate into your own relationship with him? Could you tell us, the world, what is important to know about how you knew Bob and how he knew you?

Rauschenberg: Interesting. Well, I have to say that for me, my parents were divorced when I was a baby. So I saw him on a regular—like on Sundays, we'd go to the zoo kind of a thing. But this is New York, where kids when they get to be not too terribly old take the buses and subways. [Laughs] So when I got to be a teenager, I could just stop there on my way home and just kind of hang out. That was really powerful for me in terms of just kind of dropping in when nothing's going on and just hanging out. I would also go see him down in Captiva where the thing that was so powerful there was, at a certain point in the evening, going over to the studio to watch him work. That was really rich, I'm so lucky. I'm possibly the luckiest person in the world. But that's one of the ways in which I was lucky. So I think there's this funny sort of combination where a lot of the time that I would spend with him, he always had the TV on, the same way that you're in a room with a window. The TV was a not geographically limited window [laughs] and if you're a reporter, you've got to be looking out the window. [Laughs] But we don't watch TV, my wife and I, we just don't simply watch TV. It's very hard to ignore a TV if you're not inured to it. So there was this aspect that you would hang around and be like okay, not much going on here. There's not any interesting conversation going on. So you would show up and hang around, either like I say, after school when I was a teenager. Or maybe I went down in Captiva, before we went over to the studio where we were just hanging out and sometimes would get into really interesting discussions. Often for me—my dad and I both are real night owls. I'm even more of a night owl than him, which is kind of shocking because he was a real night owl. So at one in the

morning, you talk about some interesting stuff. [Laughs] That's part of the reason to be a night owl. [Laughs] To wait until everybody who is dealing with ordinary stuff goes to bed [laughs] and stops calling you. I think there's a way in which it was this combination of putting in some time to see if there's actually a rich visiting exchange opportunity. [Laughs] A combination of that, a combination of just doing stuff, and then, like I said, this amazing opportunity to watch him work in the studio. Often too when he was having a show somewhere, I would go to his opening, in Portugal or in Beijing or wherever. That was being more a kind of support network. Okay, he's out of his orbit, he's hanging out in a hotel room. What of your life can you have with you, [laughs] to just bring part of that. I think there were all these different ways in which we could kind of have that.

Like I said, I lived with him when I was a baby, but I don't remember it.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: So it's not like if you asked me the same question about my mom. Well, we were living in the same house for eighteen years. So that's a different thing. But I think for the ways in which you communicate an understanding of the world from one person to another, I think I got out a huge amount from that. I feel like my whole way of thinking about art and understanding it comes very much from my parents and how they did it. My mom, like I said earlier, is somebody who has an idea and goes in the studio and executes it. Whereas my dad comes from a perspective of I'm going to go into conversation with my artwork and see what comes out, and if I recognize what comes out, it's not done yet.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: I think in that mix of influences I ended up being more—I ended up in photography. Even though my mom taught me photography, my dad, his natural way of thinking was a photography way of thinking, and I think that really communicated to me. I think that his sense of paying attention to ordinary things and the richness of them, which, like I say, is a photographic thing. But there's a sense of that and all three of my parents were very involved in being team players, if I can put it that way. And—

Q: What does it mean?

Rauschenberg: Well, when people say to me how generous Bob was, sometimes I just say oh yes. And sometimes I say well, actually, that's not quite what it is. If you're a point guard on a basketball team and you pass the ball to your teammate and they make a shot, you weren't being generous to give them the ball, you were being a team player. [Laughs] It's not that you're trying to achieve a personal goal and generously sacrificing something that you could use on your personal goal for somebody else. To me, that's what generous means. But if you say, I have a team goal and whatever resources I bring to the team, I'm going to contribute. If I'm a good rebounder, I'm going to rebound. If I'm a good shooter, I'm going to shoot. If I'm a good passer, I'm going to pass. And he started out with no money. He started out in a cold water place where he would have to go to parties so he could go somewhere where there was hot water and duck

into the bathroom and take a shower [laughs] and dry off real quick and look innocent. He understood where the needs were [laughs] among the team because he'd had them.

At his memorials—we had memorials for him, a few of them in different places—and at each one, after it was over people would come up to me one at a time and say, "You probably don't know this, but when I had such and such a need, your father took care of it." Your father paid my hospital bill. Your father paid my rent when we were going to lose our house. Your father did this and did that. And no, I didn't know any of that. But none of that surprised me. Actually we've set up something, the Foundation is working with a community foundation in Florida. We have a certain amount of giving we want to do in Bob's community in Florida. From here we just don't know enough. We've supported places. We continue to support places that he had been supporting. But that's a dead thing. There has to be somebody on the ground who is paying attention to what is going on there, to say, as they did with the Atget project, well yes, he took a picture of this, but now he would take a picture of that. He supported this, but now he would support that. So we're working with a community foundation and the first round of grants they gave us were like okay, here's somebody with an innovative program for this. And the symphony is doing concerts at the library and this is innovative and interesting. And we got back to the Foundation, said okay, look, here's a steering thing. The things that my dad did were much more about safety net kind of stuff. What about the food bank? He supported the battered women's shelter, this kind of stuff. This is what really spoke to him. It's like where are the holes? Not where are the opportunities to leap above necessarily. But where are the needs in my team? He organized this thing where artists who were lucky enough to become famous and their work was worth a lot of money donated artworks to hospitals in New York and said you give an

equal amount of healthcare to artists to what we gave you. If we're giving you a million dollars for the painting, you do a million dollars' worth of free healthcare for artists. It's always been about that for him. Where is there need?

Anyway, so that's kind of that sense of how do you operate in the world and how do you see yourself in the world? It's something that I got really strongly and that's why I live in Portland because it's a community where people come together and do stuff like that. It's not only my dad who is that way. Both my mom and stepfather are also that way. And to me it's just more powerful. A team of five basketball players will always beat one superstar player who is not sharing the ball.

Q: That's a great answer to a small question, thank you so much. Where do you think that philanthropic impulse, empathy, basically generosity, came from? Do you think it affected him to watch the poverty around him as a child and he held onto that? Did he ever talk to you about it?

Rauschenberg: It's funny. If your most important character trait is curiosity, empathy is going to play a big part in what you do because, I may have said this last time we talked, but when I would go to him to go with him to a museum where they were putting up a show of his work and he would look at it, the person who he wanted to ask what they thought was not the museum director or the curator. He knew what they thought. He wanted to ask the cleaning lady and the guard. [Laughs] Because he didn't know what they thought and he wanted to know what they thought because he was curious. I think if you're driven by curiosity, you're going to naturally

try to see things through somebody else's eyes as much as you can. That's empathy. You're going to try to understand things from somebody else's perspective. And when you look at that perspective and you say whoa, from here I can see a problem. [Laughs] Then when you're back in your own eyes, you still know there's a problem there. And I think it's a combination of basic personality. We all come out with our own built-in software. That's a very real thing. But then I think he also trained himself to be more and more empathetic from that basic curiosity trait. I think it just trained him to be that way. And I think it's actually more powerful. I think it's one of the things that if you try it [laughs] you will want to do it again. I'm sure to be selfish and only think about your own success and be very focused and have success—I'm not going to say that doesn't have satisfactions, I'm sure it does. But I think if you step over and then say well, what about if I have achieved success and I help other people? I think once you try that [laughs] I think you're driven more in that direction.

And he had competitiveness, he had a very high level of ambition, but that ingredient taken by itself might be distasteful. But in the right mix [laughs] it's very powerful. You get the cake to rise with baking soda. But you don't just eat a bowl of baking soda; that would be a very unpleasant meal.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But you also want the cake to rise.

Q: And that's part of the discovery in curiosity processing. Didn't he create more artwork than any other living American artist that we know of?

Rauschenberg: No, that's Andy Warhol. By a lot.

Q: Oh, thanks for that correction.

Rauschenberg: No, but you get that impression because all he wanted to do was work. And it's like okay, I got to take some time to do some other stuff. Can I go in the studio now? [Laughs] He was moving all the time. If you wanted to just make the greatest volume of pieces, you pick one thing and just copy yourself. That's the most efficient way to work, to make a whole bunch of copies of the same artwork. He would never do that. That'd be so boring. That's like doing your dishes or your laundry or something like that. That's what he said. He worked in series and if at any point he actually understood what he was doing, the series was over. Now it's time to do something else. So if you think about it in terms of a company, you've got your research and development, and you've got production. He was only interested in being the research and development guy. So if you're somebody like Warhol, production is a bigger part of that mix. Okay, we're going into production on silkscreen paintings. And there's going to be an unbelievable number of them [laughs] and nobody even knows how many there are. But with my dad, I think he worked hard. He worked a lot and his dealers would tell him, you're making too much work, we can't sell this much work. But that wasn't because he was making more work than anybody else; it was because it was hard to sell, because he was always doing something new. It's easier to have the sixteenth volume of this murder mystery series. Everybody who read

the first fifteen is going to buy it. If there's an eighth Harry Potter book, everybody in the world is going to buy it. But when [Joanne] J. K. Rowling comes out with a non-Harry Potter book, I think it sold pretty well, but it didn't sell like a Harry Potter book [laughs] and she hasn't come out with very many more since then either. [Laughs] So I think that's part of the issue.

He did work hard; he did a lot of work and really important work in all different fields. [Laughs] Dance, he did everything. He didn't really care about making objects so that they could be sold so that he could have the money. That wasn't interesting to him. He didn't mind having money; that was nice. Particularly I think on NPR [National Public Radio] they reported on a scientific study that was looking at what is the correlation between income and happiness, self-reported happiness. There was a positive correlation: the more money you had, the happier you were, up to seventy-five thousand dollars a year. And then there was no relationship. If you have more than seventy-five thousand dollars a year, that extra money has no correlation to your happiness. I thought that was pretty interesting. But anyway, so that was the case for him. He could turn around and instead of making work, make costumes and sets that would be thrown away. That was interesting and he got out of it what he was getting out of it. He didn't get any money out of it, but that was okay. He had enough money to live on. So to have more was just a chance to do stuff for the team. But to work on a dance performance was also doing stuff for the team so there was no sacrifice there. It was just one time down the court you pass, one time down the court you shoot, one time down the court you set a pick for somebody to get them free.

Q: Terrific. So I wanted to ask you about some of your travels with your dad. I know the last time we talked briefly about India, but I am sure there are many more. But maybe start with India.

Rauschenberg: Yes, I was in New York because I was having a show at 112 Greene Street [*Black and White Photographs Taken in the Last Three Years*, 1975], a solo show, a pretty big deal to have a solo show in New York, was kind of a big deal. I know it was the first one that I had in New York.

Q: Well, why don't you pause and talk about that first then. Tell us about the show and how it was received and all of that. And then we'll move to your trip to India.

Rauschenberg: Okay. Well I knew a lot about 112 Greene Street, and my mom and Bernie had both shown there. And I knew Jeffrey Lew, who ran the place. At one point I made my dad this book and this was before I was really much of a photographer. [Laughs] I took one of these Jehovah's Witness handout things—"The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life" or eternal understanding or something—I cut it up and made an art book inside it with photographs and handwork and gave it to my dad. Jeffrey Lew really liked this book; he thought it was great. So he offered me a show and the space is a long, thin space and I thought well, if it's lit and it's not that wide a space, there's going to be a lot of reflection in the glass, back and forth. Maybe I'll just put them up without glass. So I did.

They were 16-by-20-inch prints. We just mounted them on museum board and stuck them to the wall. My stepfather knows a lot about technological construction stuff. And I asked, "Is there a double stick tape that's actually going to hold?" And he said, "Oh yes, this one." He said, "It'll wreck your prints when the show is over." I said, "That's okay, I'll make new prints." [Laughs] So we hung the show, we stuck everything to the wall. Then we got a call from the gallery and they said, "You better come down here." Okay. And we came down and museum board is very absorbent and it had been completely dry and there was this big downpour of rain we had. So the boards basically expanded. The photo side didn't take water, but the other side did. So they went like this and pulled big chunks of paint off the wall because the tape was holding the paint and the museum board together very well. But the paint wasn't holding the paint to itself very well. So we came in and it was like this site of a massacre or something. The gallery had wainscoting and there was a trim board, so some of the prints were sticking in the corner, kind of bouncing in the air with one corner in the wainscoting; some of them were on the floor. It was a scene of print carnage.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: We put everything back and of course you don't normally have a change from zero to one hundred percent humidity in half an hour. So we just stuck them back up and they were fine the rest of the time. But I think because it was a big show, I came early for that and my dad was on his way to India to make prints for Gemini. He had this thing that he liked to do, which was to go someplace where they make handmade paper and make paper that has the artwork already integrated into it; rather than take the finished paper and add to it, to get in on

the ground floor as it were. So I was in New York getting ready for this show and he said, "Why don't you come to India, we're going to India." I said, "Well, I can't, I have this show in three and a half weeks or something." "Well, come for three weeks." Okay. [Laughs]

So I got my passport real quick. Actually I had to get my passport renewed and I dropped it at Rockefeller Center at four o'clock in the afternoon and it was in my mailbox the next morning. I was like how did that even work? If I had gone to Rockefeller Center and just dropped it in the mail, I wouldn't have had it the next morning. How did that happen? The government has moments of efficiency I guess. Anyway so I went with him on this trip. That was unusual in that I normally didn't travel with him when he was making work. It was more typical for me to travel with him to go to an opening of a show somewhere, where the work was already made.

I had that experience in India, where again, there were two series of things that he made when we were in Ahmedabad. One was at the [Mohandas K.] Gandhi Ashram paper making place and I was on that team, which was they would make a sheet of—

[INTERRUPTION]

So there were two series of work that were being made in Ahmedabad [*Bones* and *Unions*, both 1975]. One was being made at the Gandhi Ashram, where they made paper. And they were multiples being made for Gemini so there was a basic structure. Make a piece of paper a certain shape; the Indian papermakers would make a sheet of paper that shape. Then depending on which piece it was, we would have a bamboo structure and a pile of random fabrics that were cut

into the shapes to fit into this thing. So even though it was a multiple, each one was very different because this is a red sari fabric and this is blue and et cetera, all through them. So this was part of his curiosity. You don't just make a bunch of things that are exactly the same if you can think of a way to make them each be pretty different. This is another thing that drove his gallerists crazy, I think. Your multiples are too similar to unique pieces. That's okay; you've got to be driving people crazy.

Robert Rauschenberg
Little Joe (Bones), 1975
Handmade paper with bamboo and fabric
24 x 28 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches (61 x 72.4 x 8.9 cm)
dimensions variable
From an edition of 34, produced by Gemini G.E.L, Los Angeles

Robert Rauschenberg
Capitol (Unions), 1975
Rag-mud, bamboo, silk, string, glass, and teakwood
34 x 53 1/2 x 4 inches (86.4 x 135.9 x 10.2 cm)
From an edition of ten, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

So anyway, that would happen. So they would make a piece of paper the normal way and we would put this stuff on it and then they would blop a bunch more paper pulp on it. You can't dunk it back under the water at that point because you've got all this structure now built into it. So we would put a bunch of paper pulp on it and send it over to dry. That was one of the two things [note: *Bones*]. That's the team that I was on. I was at the Gandhi Ashram mostly.

Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg and Hildegard Lamfrom working on Rauschenberg's *Bones* series (1975), Kalam Khush paper mill, Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Gift of Suhrid Sarabhai. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni

Then at the Sarabhais' house, they set up a thing. He knew that they built houses out of paper, paper pulp, and he wanted to make basically sculptural pieces using that same technique [note: *Unions*]. This is what you do here, I want to do it, but I want to do my thing with it. And he said, "But listen, I'm going to need it to be like cotton rag paper." And they said, "Oh yeah, that's what we use." "Really, oh? That's nice." [Laughs] And plus they put turmeric in it because it keeps bugs from eating it. Why? I don't know. Oh it seems like it would make it delicious, but bugs have different taste apparently. So those were being made at the Sarabhais' house, compound. I did a little bit of that, but I was mostly at the factory. And my dad was at the Sarabhais' compound doing the sculpture stuff. We weren't on the same team there, so we weren't together all the time.

So the pieces that were made with that are wonderful because they're very spicy smelling. They're terrific. I was just basically working all the time. Whenever we would need something,

okay, we need some more camel whips. Not that we were whipping camels, but he was making pieces that had camel whips as part of their art materials. I'd say, "Oh, I'll go get them." So a driver would drive me into town and I'd buy the camel whips and get driven back. I actually did some photography, basically shooting out the window of the car. But it was really fun, it was really great, and the people we were staying with were vegetarian and liked their food very bland oddly. Everybody but me was like why are we eating all vegetarian food every day? And the Sarabhais had this thing—they were locavores—they were only eating what was available in season. And so every day the grocery guy would show up with a silver tray with one chickpea and one okra: this is what we have today.

One night the Sarabhais said, "Well, we're going to take you to our drive-in restaurant." [Laughs] It wasn't really a drive-in restaurant, but anyway, "We're going to drive you to this place that we like that has tandoori chicken." From that point on there was a take-out order of tandoori chicken every dinner. [Laughs] My dad had had it with the chickpeas.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: Actually they took us one night to a drive-in movie, although we had the only car at the drive-in movie. There were some people with handcarts and a lot of people walked in and sat in bleachers. I don't know if you know, but Bollywood movies are really long. A Bollywood movie is three and a half, four hours long. So where in an American theater there's a snack bar with soda and popcorn, the theater we went to had a food court [laughs] with independent merchants making different food that you could eat. I tried to eat there, but I couldn't eat

anything. It was the hottest food I ever ate in my life. Everything was absolutely like nineteen star [laughs] call the entire fire department, all surrounding communities.

But yes, it was really wonderful to be there and to do all that and the sort of cultural stuff of it. And then of course I had to go back before everybody else did. I was going back to my show at 112 Greene Street. Everybody else was staying there and the Sarabhais took people up to Kashmir and showed them Kashmir. And everybody was jealous of me because I got to go back to America and I was jealous because they got to travel around. Actually we spent a day in Mumbai before we went to Ahmedabad, so I saw Mumbai a little bit. But I really haven't seen India.

The other thing that I had with my dad, to be with him when he was actually making work, was when he went up to Seattle—and of course I live in Portland. He was doing a commission for Benaroya Hall, the symphony hall up there, and he wanted to go up and photograph there and make images, which he would then use in the painting. There's a big painting that's there [*Echo [Anagram (A Pun)]*, 1998]. And so we went around Seattle photographing together. And that was typical; often when he was going photographing, he was with somebody. It was Terry Van Brunt or Darryl [R. Pottorf] or somebody, so there were two of them shooting the place up. And I got to be that person that time, which was really fun. I took a bunch of pictures. He ended up being a little bit frustrated because his idea was okay, what are the cultural buildings—this was going into this new symphony hall. So it's kind of a cultural building and what about the library and the opera house in Seattle? The opera house was actually in a trailer [laughs] and Seattle now has a beautiful library. It's a wonderful building. But at the time it was a really crummy

little building. His idea was not functioning. So the mural ended up using a lot of pictures of musical instruments. He went with not the Seattle side, but the symphony side, in terms of the focus for it. But it was really great to hang around with him.

Robert Rauschenberg
Echo [Anagram (A Pun)], 1998
Inkjet pigment transfer on polylaminate
145 1/2 x 537 inches (369.6 x 1364 cm)
Seattle Symphony

I have a friend in Seattle who I've known since the seventies. When we started Blue Sky there was this photographer, Ford Gilbreath, who was working at Evergreen in the photo department. And my friend, Craig Hickman, who is one of the persons who started the gallery, was also working in the photo department there. And he would periodically come down with these amazing pictures that Ford had given him that made me feel like I've got to meet the guy who is making these pictures. Ford was in the first show that we had at Blue Sky, which was *A Group Show* [1975]. And the second show that we had at Blue Sky was a two-person show of Ford and somebody else [*Ford Gilbreath & Kathleen Meighan*, 1975]. We've shown him a number of times since then. But when we decided that, at Blue Sky, that we wanted to do some monograph books and one of the first ones we did was Ford. And I was working on the book and I got a letter in the mail from Ford's mother saying how great it was that I was helping Ford with this

book and that it was so great particularly since we're kinfolk. I'm going huh? [Laughs] I've known Ford for years, what do you mean we're kinfolk? And she goes on to say that her maiden name is Rauschenberg. And it turns out Ford and I are third cousins, so our great grandfathers are brothers. Basically everybody named Rauschenberg in this country is related. It's these two brothers who came over. But there's not that many of them. So I told my dad this story when we were in Seattle and he said, "Wait a minute, I have a member of my family who's a good artist? I've got to meet this guy."

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: So we hooked them up and he actually bought some stuff, some prints from Ford. Ford really is a great photographer. Not necessarily nepotism, but he was—

Q: [Laughs] Family appreciation? That's neat.

Rauschenberg: That was fun. But it was nice to just hang out and it had that aspect that the other ones do, where we're just there for a show or something. We're having our meals together, we're just living in the place that was wonderful. But then also to be out, like I said, similar to the Atget project, let me see what you're looking at, what you're not looking at, and kind of get that fly on the wall opportunity, and then to be an active participant in it, well let's go over here some more, this looks good in this way, so—

Q: Did he ever use any of your photographs in his works?

Rauschenberg: No. No and in fact when he had his intracranial bleed and he couldn't photograph anymore because he couldn't use his right hand—now, if you use a cell phone for a camera, you can shoot left-handed. But with a traditional camera, you really can't. It's just not possible. And so he asked various people who worked for him, "If you're going somewhere, just take pictures." He didn't ask me, but the way I work is, I take pictures, since I've been a color photographer anyway, I just get 4-by-6 work prints made. So I just got two sets made and I sent him one set. He said to me, "Thank you for doing that, but this doesn't really work for me because your pictures are whole things. They're not parts of things." [Laughs] And I thought that was nice.

Q: Atget.

Rauschenberg: But for his employees, when he would tell them to photograph, he would say, "Don't try to make good pictures, just take pictures of stuff." [Laughs] And it's interesting because he was such a good photographer, but it's like if he was going to have somebody else do pictures, he didn't want to get a different good photographer. He didn't really see that as a collaboration opportunity, which he could have. That could have been a way to approach the non-functioning right hand problem. But it was okay, just give me the fabric and I'll sew things out of it.

Q: So what were some other travels that you took together; did you go on any ROCI trips?

Rauschenberg: Yes, I went to *ROCI CUBA* [1988] and I went to Beijing, *ROCI CHINA* [1985]. And of course I went to a lot of his shows around the country, other places. Actually I went to ROCI in Washington, D.C. too, in the National Gallery [of Art, 1991]. I went to that show, but that doesn't qualify as international travel.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But anyway, but no. It was really nice. I went with him when he went to Porto. He was having a show in Porto, Portugal, and I went and hung out there with him [*Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2007]. And when he came home again, we traveled south through Portugal and Spain and down into Morocco. That was nice because he had been to Morocco as a young artist and then again as a mature artist. And I had never been there and it was nice to go. I had that also with Turkey. I met him in Venice [Italy] and he had just been in Turkey, and he came from Turkey to Venice where his *Labyrinth* piece [*A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)*, 1994] was being shown on an island in the Venice lagoon [*Robert Rauschenberg*, Monastero Mechitarista dell'Isola di San Lazzaro degli Armeni, 1996].

A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth), 1994
Acrylic and graphite on 29 panels of bonded aluminum, anodized mirrored aluminum, and Lexan with aluminum framing
Dimensions variable
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
Diver images courtesy Aaron Siskind Foundation

Installation view, *A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)* (1994) in *Robert Rauschenberg*, Monastero Mechitarista dell'Isola di San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice, Italy, 1996.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

I was fascinated by the idea of the *Labyrinth* piece and I just said, "Okay, let me know. Whenever you're showing that, wherever you show that, I'm going. I want to see this piece." And the answer turned out to be Venice. It was on this island, on top of the boat garage. It was sort of a flat plaza. It was the roof of the boat garage. So among its images, the piece has pictures by Aaron Siskind, it was a series called *The Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation* [1953–61]. It's shots from below of kids cliff diving. So they're against the white sky in all of these wild positions and of course my dad knew Aaron from Black Mountain and we did the show right after Aaron Siskind died. I had talked to Aaron and arranged it and then he died, but the Siskind Foundation knew that we were doing this and they said don't worry, don't worry, your show is fine, you're going to do it. And so my dad got the booklet from Blue Sky with whatever it was, twenty of these images, and he called me up and he said, "I loved Aaron and I love these pictures, and these pictures are perfect to integrate into my work or something. Do you think I

could get permission to use these images? And it's not about money, they can take a percentage of the sales of the artwork or I can pay them a fee, whatever, I don't care about that. I just want to work with these images of this person I loved." And so I connected him with the Foundation and that all happened. And so when I went to the *Labyrinth* piece in the Venice lagoon here were all these Aaron Siskind divers that I had played at least some role in connecting him up with, diving into the lagoon in Venice. And you walk through the *Labyrinth* and again this is one of these things about it being a conversation, it's not a fixed artwork. As you walk through it, it's opaque panels and transparent panels and mirrored panels, all with images. So as you move through them you're constantly changing the collaging of these images. And then of course you're in it too, so you're having a physical experience of space. And to see these divers going into the lagoon, it was absolutely amazing.

In fact it was funny. The next time that was shown was in Ferrara, Italy, for another show [*Robert Rauschenberg*, Palazzo dei Diamanti, 2004] and I went to that opening too. It was set up in the courtyard of this museum and I was talking with some of the other people there and saying well, the *Labyrinth* is nice here, but it's not like it was in Venice in the lagoon. And the night before the opening it started to snow and suddenly this *Labyrinth* piece was in the snow. And all of us were being snarky about how Venice was better and we were like okay, okay, we take it back.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: I actually took a panoramic picture of it that's in Mary Lynn Kotz's book, of that piece in the snow [*Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, 2004].

Installation view, *A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)* (1994) in *Robert Rauschenberg*, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, Italy, 2004. Photo: Christopher Rauschenberg

Q: I've seen it. I just interviewed her sometime last year.

Rauschenberg: Great, yes.

Q: That's wonderful. Of all your father's different shows, series, which one was has meant the most to you or do you feel speaks the most directly to you as an artist?

Rauschenberg: Wow. That's hard to say. I remember one time we went down to Captiva, he had just finished the *Apogamy Pods* [1999–2000]. It was a series where he decided he wanted to see about leaving more white space in the pieces, having less imagery and more empty space. An absolutely gorgeous series; they're so good. And he did *Synapsis Shuffle* [1999], which was fifty-two parts of paintings; it was actually two jokers too. But fifty-two parts of paintings, with the idea that you would tell a collector that they could make their own Rauschenberg. They had to buy a certain number of parts and then they could put them however they wanted and that would

be a Rauschenberg. Bob said he was looking forward to going to some collector's house and looking and saying, "That's the worst Rauschenberg I ever saw." [Laughs]

Robert Rauschenberg
S (Apogamy Pods), 1999
Inkjet pigment transfer, acrylic, and graphite on polylaminate
61 x 95 1/4 inches (154.9 x 241.9 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg: Synapsis Shuffle*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2000. Work shown is *Synapsis Shuffle* (1999). Photo: Jerry L. Thompson, courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

But what ended up happening is Leonard [A.] Lauder bought them for the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York], the whole thing. So now how does it work. [Laughs] They had to sit down and write rules for how do you have—like you do in sports, a draft, pick a number of people to stand in for the collectors and have them, okay, you pick first, what section you want, then you pick, then you pick. And assemble them. It's been shown a few times now in various places. It's been shown in Paris [*Robert Rauschenberg*, Fondation Dina Vierny, Musée Maillol, 2002] and it's been shown here in various places. And of course, each time it's paintings that never existed before the show because it's not an infinite number of combinations, but there are a lot of combinations. For practical purposes there's an infinite number of ways to put them together. My dad loved the one in New York because one of the people was Ileana [Sonnabend]. And Ileana said, "I don't want to choose. I'll just take whatever is left. Everybody else pick and

I'll take the ones that are left." Bob sort of smiled and said, "And of course, hers was the best." [Laughs]

Arne Glimcher, Mike Wallace, Ileana Sonnabend, and Rauschenberg at the *Synapsis Shuffle* selection event, Pace Gallery warehouse, New York, May 15, 2000. Final selections exhibited in *Robert Rauschenberg: Synapsis Shuffle*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2000. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

So the *Synapsis Shuffle* and the *Apogamy Pods* were there, neither one of which had been shown yet. They were both series, were just in the studio still, hadn't gone up to New York. I think there was a third series that hadn't been shown yet too. And my dad sort of said, "I can't launch into another thing. I'm going to get in too much trouble." [Laughs] So he proceeded to make a bunch of costumes for Merce Cunningham, which was lovely. It was a perfectly good thing to do. But I do remember going down and seeing those *Apogamy Pods* and going, "Oh my god, these are so great." So that would be one possible answer.

Another one would be, we went down one time and my dad was ready to launch into a new series. After dinner he went over to the studio and he was rooting around on the shelves. And he pulls out, there are these batiks that he got during ROCI time, where you could give somebody your photos and they would make batiks of them, with the images from your photos. And so he got a bunch of those done and he didn't use them because they were too ugly. And he said, "I

know these are ugly, but I can't waste them. I have to figure out how to use these." And we were there for, I don't know, a week or something. And by the time we left, there was this whole suite of *Faux-Tapis* paintings [1995] that are built around these too-ugly-to-use [laughs] batiks. And of course they're magnificent, I mean they're great. So that was really interesting to see it go from I've got no idea what I'm doing. Well here's the toughest opponent I could step into the ring with. [Laughs] And then to have these finished, beautiful things on the wall. So that was great in a way to be there through that whole process.

Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (Faux-Tapis), 1995
Fabric collage on bonded aluminum
128 1/2 x 121 x 2 inches (326.4 x 307.3 x 5.1 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

I was saying also when, at one point, my dad was in L.A. in Larry Bell's studio and he was doing the *Currents* [1970], I guess. I was down there when he was working on those too; that's the other time that I was around when he was working on work. But I think I would have to say, the answer to your question, I would go with *Apogamy Pods*. That's a series that I think is undervalued. I don't think people get it. In general people don't get the new work. It's always—it's like a standing wave, where whatever he's done in the last twenty years, that's the new work

and it's not as good as the old work. But then it keeps moving. And this thing that used to be nineteen years old is now twenty-one years old and that's the old work that's better than the new work.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: Just this twenty-year timeline. How far ahead of your time are you? Twenty years. And at one point the Portland Art Museum wanted to buy a piece of dad's. We were doing a capital campaign for Blue Sky and I knew that Bruce Guenther, the curator of the Portland Art Museum, had talked to me. He took me out to lunch and he said, "I don't expect you to solve this problem for me, but we're doing a new wing that's modern and contemporary art and I don't have anything by your dad except some multiples, and I have to tell the story of art and I'm missing a major thing." [Laughs] "I can't tell the story without Rauschenberg and I don't expect you to answer this for me, but I want you to know this is a problem that I have."

And it's a big wing. I think Bruce said it's bigger than the Whitney in terms of how much space. The old Whitney. So we were doing this capital campaign and Bruce had just bought from Dorothy Lichtenstein one of Roy [Lichtenstein]'s brushstroke sculptures [*Brushstrokes*, 1996] that stands in front of the museum, for a million dollars, which they gave him a good deal on it. And the director of the museum was really pleased. He said, "Well this is great." He said, "If you can find me another homerun like this for a million dollars, you're preapproved." So I heard this and I said to Bruce, "Look, let's do it. Why don't I ask my dad if he will give Blue Sky something that you can buy from us for a million dollars and then we'll have our capital

campaign, we'll be on solid footing, and you'll have this thing that you need to have that you're not going to get otherwise." [Laughs] And since there's not a story with it, by the time you finally get around to getting it, you won't be able to afford it. [Laughs]

So we did that and my dad said yes, he would give me something. I handed Bruce some [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York] catalogue and something else and sort of said figure out what you want and go get something that costs a million dollars and buy it from us. You're preapproved; buy it from us. I'll have him give it to Blue Sky. And I did tell Bruce, but pick something that's nineteen years old [laughs] because that way you're on the right side, you get the maximum bang for your million dollars, and almost immediately it's going to be the old work that the new work isn't as good as. So he did, he bought this beautiful sculpture that I think was nineteen years old. [Laughs] [Note: *Patrician Barnacle (Scale)*, 1981]

Robert Rauschenberg
Patrician Barnacle (Scale), 1981 (two views)
Solvent transfer, fabric collage, mirrored Plexiglas, and reflector on plywood with wood stepladder
94 x 37 x 55 inches (238.8 x 94 x 139.7 cm)
Portland Art Museum, Oregon
Museum Purchase: Funds provided by Carol and John Hampton

Q: What a fascinating story. Did you ever do anything like that again?

Rauschenberg: No. [Laughs]

Q: No, it's just so interesting. It's so innovative.

Rauschenberg: Well, it was nice. And basically our capital campaign was a two-and-a-half-million-dollar capital campaign or something. But the budget of the gallery was only about a hundred thousand dollars a year, so to do a two-million-dollar capital campaign, that's like twenty times your normal budget. That's a little tough. You're not supposed to really be more than ten times your budget, I don't think, in the rules of the game. But we could go to all the foundations and say, "Look, we already have a million." "Oh well in that case we'll give you a hundred thousand." Whereas if we went to them and said, "We have zero," they said, "Oh we're not interested because we don't think you're going to do it." So it made a huge difference and we actually ended up getting tax credits, historic tax credits and new market tax credits, which is a very complicated thing. But we ended up getting fifty cents on the dollar for buying the space and renovating it. So it was this weird thing where we finished our capital campaign without ever going to our members and asking for money because we didn't know we were going to get the tax credits, but you hit the halfway mark and suddenly you're done.

Q: What a story. That's a beautiful story.

Rauschenberg: It's a little bit off-topic, but interesting.

Q: It's really interesting.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So I guess another thing I wanted to ask you about—well, while we're in the topic of that and Bob's travels, did he come out and visit you at all?

Rauschenberg: Yes, a couple of times. At one point I had a mid-career retrospective at the Portland Art Museum [1991] and he and my mom both came out for that. My stepfather didn't come because my stepfather was a professor of sculpture in Stockholm at that point and he had classes; he couldn't come. But my mom and Bob both came out; it was very sweet actually. It was terrific to have them come and see the show. And at one point after the opening we were all in Bob's hotel room and Bob looked over to my mom and he said, "Where do you think we go when we die?" And my mom instantly without a moment's hesitation said, "To the studio!" [Laughs] And then he was very happy. [Laughs]

Q: Just to add this into the historical record, when you were working in Paris, they each had shows in Europe. And so your mom was in Stockholm at that point, in '97, '98.

Rauschenberg: Oh, it was so annoying.

Q: Can you talk about all three of you being in Europe at the same time?

Rauschenberg: What happened was, the opening for my dad's Guggenheim retrospective [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, 1997–98] was the exact same day as my mom's retrospective at the national gallery [Nationalmuseum] in Stockholm [*Illuminations: Bookworks of Susan Weil*, 1997]. The exact same day. I kept waiting for the days to solidify to know am I going to Europe first and then New York or New York first then Europe? And so I ended up going to the fancy patron pre-opening for the Guggenheim show and then for my mom's I was on a plane because it takes a whole day to go to Europe because of the time zones. At their actual openings I was on a plane. [Laughs] And then the day after my mom's opening at the museum, she also had a show at a place, a graphics place. She had a show at a graphics museum, so I went to that opening [Grafikens Hus, Mariefred, Sweden]. So I went to one opening for each. The same day? That's just mean.

[Laughter]

Q: That's a great story.

Rauschenberg: They were both incredible shows. They were both fabulous shows. And in Sweden, for my mom's show, there was a book also of her daily poems that she does. They published a book, *A Cup of Coffee*, that instantly sold out [*Enkoppkaffee*, Leandermalmsten, 1997]. At the opening the museum had ten copies or something that were the last ten copies available in the world. The publisher who did it was a little bit shady. Shady is the wrong word. It was a sort of artist thing and it was undercapitalized and the money that they made from selling all the books was already spent on some other stuff that they lost money on. So they

couldn't afford to reprint her book even though it was selling out in a week. How can you not afford to reprint it? Whatever else you were going to do with the money isn't going to sell out in a week. So it just ended up being this rare book. So that was great and of course the Guggenheim catalogue for my dad's show was great. But yes, it is funny sometimes, my traveling tends to be related to me, my mom or my dad or my stepfather having a show somewhere.

[Laughter]

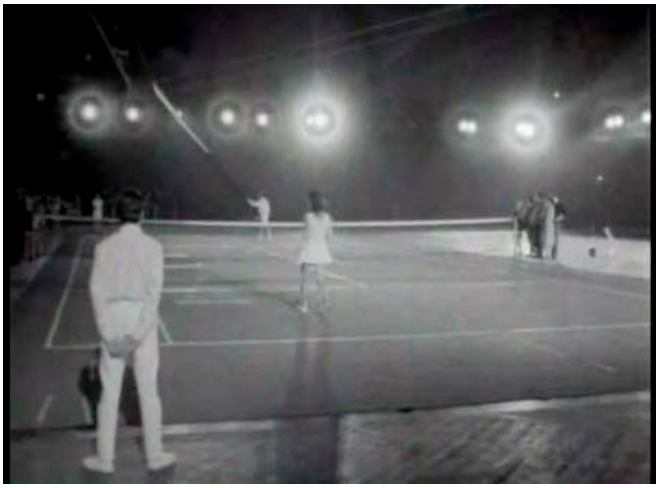
Q: You should do your own chronology of traveling.

Rauschenberg: Yes, I can't keep track of it all.

Q: So we did want to hear too of your involvement in your father's shows, the Happenings and 9 Evenings[: Theatre & Engineering, 1966] and anything else.

Rauschenberg: Yes, I was a ball boy in 9 Evenings. Christine Williams and I were the two ball boys, and Frank Stella and his tennis instructor were the two tennis players. And they had rackets that had mics in them, and every time that they hit the ball, it was made to amplify sound but also one of the lights that was lighting the place turned off. So as they kept hitting the ball, it got darker and darker, and eventually all of the lights were out and it was totally dark, and there were TV monitors that the audience could see that had infrared cameras feeding them. That was very complicated because infrared stuff was like sort of national security, secret equipment, and it was very complicated for them to get permission to have this infrared stuff there. But basically for the

audience, the place is completely dark and they suddenly can hear all these people coming in but they can't see them except on the monitor. But in real life they can't see them. And my dad had, I think it was parents from my school, [laughs] he'd said look, I'll give some artwork to the school, but here's what I want in exchange. I want all these parents to come and I have a list of, I think, is it four commands? Four actions? It was a list of actions that they could do in whatever order, however many times each. I think it was four things.



Mimi Kanarek and Frank Stella on the tennis court in Rauschenberg's *Open Score* (1966), 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, October 1966. Still from *9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering* (1966). 16 mm, black-and-white, 25 minutes. Produced by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), New York

It was about the audience being able to have this disjunction between what they couldn't see live, but they could see on the monitor. What they could hear and experience with their other senses, live.

When I was younger, there was a piece that I was somewhere between a performer and a stagehand in. I rolled out these old-fashioned laundry carts that have a metal structure and a canvas pre-hanging sack with a wooden lid. [Note: *Spring Training*]

Q: They still use those in this building. [Laughs]

Rauschenberg: Ah, probably, yes. And so I pushed this thing out onto the stage and I opened the wooden lid and there's light coming out of it. And what it's full of is small turtles with flashlights taped on their backs with duct tape. So I put the turtles out on the floor and that was the lighting for the piece, as the turtles crawled around and shined lights on whatever they did. And then I was also a soundman for it. I had a phone book with a microphone and it was my job to tear the pages of the phone book as the soundtrack.

Q: That was for the Happenings?

Rauschenberg: Yes, it was one of the Happenings. And Trisha Brown was in that too, she was in a wedding dress and there was a bunch of other stuff.

Q: Wonderful. What a rich life you've had.

Rauschenberg: Yes, really. As I say, I might be the luckiest person in the world. It's possible.

Q: So one of the other things that I found at the Foundation of course, going through correspondence, was to see how often you wrote your dad and sent him silly cards or birthday wishes, and you also sent similar wishes to Bob Petersen. Pete, you called him. Could you talk a little bit about how close you all were and how you kept in touch and what that all meant?

Rauschenberg: Yes, I have to throw a little historical note in here, which is at the time when I was going off to college, you didn't really call home very much because long distance phone calls were really expensive. And it would be unimaginable to a young person today that basically you went off to college and you were no longer in touch with anybody you knew. It would just change, that's it. [Laughs] At Reed, and they still do this, they give you the whole month of January off. So you had two—you had a summer break, but then you also had a big winter break. We used to drive back to the East Coast twice a year. So we would come back for summer and we would also come back in the winter break. And we would be in New York and we would go down to Captiva and hang out in Captiva. So I would show up with a Volkswagen bus with a bunch of my college and at least one of my high school friends [laughs] and just hang out.

But basically you would call some, you would write postcards, you would write letters, this kind of stuff. Of course my dad didn't really write letters, he was very dyslexic and that was not a comfortable way for him to communicate for himself. It's funny because he loved language and he was very good with language and when he did sit down to write something, he would write very beautifully. And when he talked, one of the things that I loved about going to his openings was that I would always go to whatever press conferences they would have. And they would generally have maybe three interviews like this and then that was sort of enough. Wherever we are, pick three people and that's it. [Laughs] We're not doing any more than that. And they would ask him whatever kind of goofy questions they would ask him. And he would frame these answers that were so rich and complicated and multilayered. He was basically giving them a written answer but he was speaking it to him. And particularly after his intracranial bleed and he was in a wheelchair, he was this old guy in a wheelchair and they asked him a question and he

didn't answer it yet. Did he space out? Should I ask him the question again? Should I ask him another question? The interviewer is like uh oh, now what's going on? And then out would come this answer and you'd go oh, that's a good answer. Oh wait a minute, that's an even better answer than I thought. Whoa wait a minute, that's got another layer to it, that's really good. And of course part of that too was constructing—they would ask him some preposterous question and instead of just saying no comment or answering the preposterous question—I'll make up a random example like, "Why do you not kick dogs?" And then he would say, "Well, I don't kick dogs because I like dogs." But then they would take the question out. So then it's like here, why is this guy saying I don't kick dogs because I like dogs, is he crazy? [Laughs] And he did like dogs, he had lots of dogs—so funny random example, I guess. But so he had to not only figure out what's a rich answer, but he had to figure out how do I turn the question into a rich question and then build a rich answer to it. [Laughs] So it was very rich and good that way. But anyway, so he didn't write letters very much. I would talk to him on the phone. I typically would call him on the weekend because during the week he had staff there and it was lively, stuff going on around him. But on the weekend it was like I'm just hanging out by myself in this small town of Captiva. [Laughs] It was his small town, he liked it, but he didn't have the staff around, he didn't have the people around. So I would try to call him on the weekend and contribute to some presence.

Q: Was that one of your favorite places to visit him or did you enjoy going there?

Rauschenberg: Oh yes, it was great to go down there and hang out. He was there for a long time; he was there since I was a teenager. I actually went down with him before he bought the property

and we stayed in the South Seas Plantation, he was checking it out. But from the time that he bought the property, that's when I was going down there with my friends. Well, when he first went down there, he would kind of look around in the early evening, late afternoon, do a head count and wade out into the Gulf of Mexico and just catch enough fish for dinner. It was very different than it is now. [Laughs] And to see it all kind of change, his studio and then his big new studio and just see everything evolve over there. But like I said, just to go hang out and watch him work and make work, was so powerful. What an amazing opportunity. I guess there's footage of him painting *Barge* [1962–63], but apparently the people want a thousand dollars a second for it so don't expect to ever see it, whoever you are, in the future. I just heard that the day before yesterday. [Note: Footage of Rauschenberg painting *Barge* in the television episodes "Robert Rauschenberg," *USA Artists* (WNET/13, 1966) and "Empire of Signs," *American Visions* (WNET/13, 1996).]

Q: Friday. So he has many different legacies. And not to put you on the spot too much, but how would you, again as an artist and a son and as a person involved with the Foundation, cast that legacy toward the future?

Rauschenberg: Well, it's interesting because we're doing the artist residency program [Rauschenberg Residency] in Captiva and we have seven batches of ten artists at a time basically. It's not always ten artists at a time, we have the summer when we reserve for people who can't come unless they can bring their kids and we can't accommodate as many artists at that one. And sometimes people cancel at the last minute. It ends up not quite being seventy artists a year. But we have all these artists coming in and the combination of his art making and

his philosophy and team play, his sense of what you can accomplish in the world and just—there's a combination of ambition and childlike innocence that's unusual, and that is very moving to the artists who come down there. I've actually talked about—and we haven't done it yet and I don't know if we will—but I've talked about, when we have a philanthropy committee for the Foundation, which we're talking about setting up, I said we should think about having a child on the philanthropy committee; to have that sort of well, why do you want to give money for a study for that? These people are hungry. [Laughs] To bring that aspect of my dad's way of thinking into it. But anyway, we haven't done that; we'll see if we ever do.

So for these artists, they come away and some of them know about Robert Rauschenberg from art history, some of them don't even know that. And as our residency director in Captiva, Ann Brady, just said at the meeting on Friday, "They come in knowing a little bit about Robert Rauschenberg and they leave knowing Bob." I thought that that was pretty great. And I think it's true and I think in terms of the legacy, possibly the most powerful thing that we're doing in the Foundation is the Residency program because we've had two hundred artists through there already who come away with Bob as really part of their way of thinking and making art and all that. That's what you want. You're not trying to clone them and make copies of them. But it's about having descendants in a certain kind of way and having his way of thinking and his way of art making and being propagated into the artists as they go forward.

He was interested in trying to have a presence in a museum after he was gone and there was some talk originally about the Guggenheim, when they were going to do the downtown Guggenheim over the water. The one that fell through after 9/11 [September 11, 2001]. That was

going to have a big focus on Rauschenberg, that was going to have a major Rauschenberg thing, and Thomas Krens had said it's going to be the museum that's Rauschenberg plus. [Laughs] And that's kind of what he wanted. He didn't want to have like the [Andy] Warhol Museum [Pittsburgh], just a standalone, "This museum is only me. I'll get too lonely there." He wanted to have a museum that would have young artists and continuing other artists passing all through it and to be in that context. He didn't want to be by himself, he wanted to be in a context. This is how we're accomplishing that.

Q: Wow. How exciting. Are there any last personal reflections you'd like to share? Any thoughts that come to mind? Questions I haven't asked? Well, there is one thing, which is previously we talked about this but not today until you brought it up. The importance of his own childlike, in the best possible way, vision.

Rauschenberg: Yes, well, if you think about the emperor's new clothes story, it's the child who's actually seeing what's going on and isn't being so lorded over with what you're supposed to see. What you're supposed to say. So I think there's a way in which, if your primary trait is curiosity, as his was, you have to maintain a childishness because that's a childish trait, if I can put it that way without being at all pejorative towards childishness. I think if you look at the photography world, that's something that photographers really try to hang onto. The sense of, get away from having your adult filters of what's important and what's not important because the camera does not share them, the camera does not have them at all. And if you and your camera diverge so radically in your world views, that's going to be a problem. [Laughs]

And so I think there's a huge number of artists whose work has to do with how do they understand the world as children, which is partly because they want to get away from that sort of adult thing and rather than cleanse it out of their adult life, they go back to where they were without it.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But I can't imagine how many twenty-minute one-on-one portfolio reviews with photographers I've done. I wouldn't be able to count, but it's thousands. And one of the things that people either will say up front or if I push them a bit on, okay, you could be doing anything, why are you doing this? I'm not saying this is bad or this is good, but you have an infinite number of things you could be doing and you're not doing them, except for this one. [Laughs] How come? And over and over it will come down to well, my father was a salesman. Or we showed work by somebody who did this wonderful series of pictures standing on opera stages all over the world, facing, with an 8-by-10 view camera, shooting out into the empty, open seats of the opera house. And when we did his show at Blue Sky, we had him interviewed in a conversation with the head of the Portland Opera. The two of them were talking with an audience and at one point, the photographer said, "Yes, my grandfather was a failed opera singer." And of course I immediately go well that's why you're standing in the middle of the stage in front of an empty audience. [Laughs] After his talk, I said something. I said, "That's great, that's why you're doing this." He said, "You think so?" It's just so funny because often people have so little insight. It's kind of amazing. [Laughs]

But in a way you don't need to know. It's not something you need to know. But I always feel like by the time you get to the end of a project, at that point, you should understand. I don't care if you understand at the beginning and I don't want it to be the same at the end as the beginning, so it's probably a detriment if you understand it too much at the beginning. But I think to have a sense of okay, that was the richest emotional vein for me, why? That just seems useful in navigating your next steps. [Laughs] I think that's the job of the artist, is to always go deeper and deeper. You say to yourself, there's an opening in the rock, I think there's gold in there. But then, that's not the end of the story. Then you have to trace the vein and find the richest veins. To me that's the job of the artist, to keep digging deeper into what's at the heart of this. Why do I care about this so much and what's the example that's the strongest and is really—they're all good, but this one is on another level. So let's only make these. [Laughs]

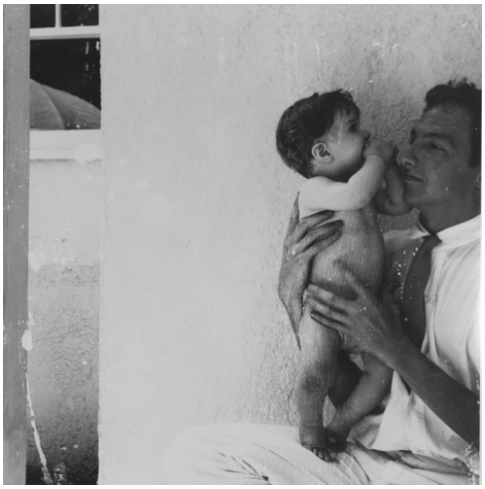
[INTERRUPTION]

Q2: So continuing the session with Christopher Rauschenberg, we're going to talk about some of these photographs. We have a collection here, which are throughout your life. I'll just hand them to you and anything that just comes to mind is just—

Rauschenberg: High quality Xeroxes.

Q2: Exactly, only the best.

Rauschenberg: Well, I'm a baby in the picture and I don't remember it at all, but it's sweet looking.



Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg, 1952. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Susan Weil

Q2: Any comment at all?

Rauschenberg: I don't have too much to say. One of the things that's interesting in *Canyon* [1959], a piece of my dad's that's now at MoMA and before that was at the Met, with the eagle that's not allowed to be sold, it has to be continuously on view. I'm in there. It's one of the things that's funny. Periodically people figure out that's me. Often they don't too, but that's kind of nice.

Robert Rauschenberg
Canyon, 1959
Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror on canvas with oil on bald eagle, string, and pillow
81 3/4 x 70 x 24 inches (207.6 x 177.8 x 61 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of the family of Ileana Sonnabend

Q2: And are there a lot of baby pictures around like this? Or is this more unusual?

Rauschenberg: Not so many. There's a wonderful Schirmer/Mosel book of my dad's early photography. And there are some beautiful pictures of my mom being pregnant with me in Central Park [New York]. And there are some very nice baby pictures of me and there's a nice baby picture of me by Aaron Siskind. That's me and my dad made me a baby garment [laughs] that I'm in. So it's kind of fun to have baby pictures shot by Aaron Siskind and Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil. But yes, I think I had a terrific life and I'm sorry that there's part of it that I don't remember because I think that must have been really fun, but apparently I was a bit colicky as a baby so maybe it wasn't as much fun as I'm thinking it was.

Robert Rauschenberg
'Topher, 1952
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)
This photograph appears in *Canyon* (1959)

Robert Rauschenberg
Susan–Central Park N.Y.C. (IV), 1951
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Q2: All right, so maybe it was a blessing that that's part locked away. But we have some more here, as you're getting older, so perhaps—

Rauschenberg: So here's one from the zoo.

Robert and Christopher Rauschenberg, Central Park Zoo, New York, ca. 1959. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q2: The zoo here?

Rauschenberg: Yes, my parents got divorced when I was a baby. And so for between that time and up to when I was traveling by myself on the subway to and from school, it was this typical thing of okay, on the weekend, go spend a day with your dad. I remember going and doing things like going to the zoo, like in this picture. Just walking around and doing things. I remember at one point I saw a microscope and I said, "Oh, I'd love to have that." I was a physics and math kid growing up. I ended up in the family business, but I was the black sheep of the family for a while there. And he said, "Would you really use it?" And he got me one; he got me this microscope. There was all this regular stuff that that relationship has built into it. It's like here, why don't you get me something? That's a typical thing that happens on a weekend dad day [laughs] probably. But then when I was a little bit older and I could just stop there after school and just hang out, that was nice.

Q2: And how old were you when you started doing that?

Rauschenberg: Well, we moved when I was in ninth grade. We moved, my mom and I, and my stepfather and sister, moved from East Eighty-seventh Street down to Chinatown, at which point it was on my way home to stop there. So really from ninth grade to twelfth grade is the time when I was mostly just why should I take the subway all the way home? Why don't I stop and hang out with my dad for a little bit and then walk the last part of it home? It's only a twenty-minute walk or something from my dad's house to my mom's house.

Q2: And this photo is a bit earlier than that, we would say?

Rauschenberg: Yes, this is a lot earlier than that. [Laughs] But yes, it was really nice to be able to just stop by. One night I was there and I said, "Okay, I'm going to go home now." And he said, "No, why don't you stick around for dinner? We have Cartier-Bresson coming over." And of course I'm a photographer and Henri Cartier-Bresson is one of the greatest photographers in the history of the world. But I wasn't really a photographer yet and I had homework to do and I said, "No, no, I've got to go home and do my homework." So of course now the lesson that I have learned is you should never do your homework. [Laughs] Forget the homework, stay for dinner with Cartier-Bresson. And then it's funny too because Cartier-Bresson took a bunch of pictures of my dad at that visit. I don't know if it was that day or the next day. He told my dad, "Well, I'll send you some prints of the pictures I took of you." But he never did. And my dad used to always complain about that, "Cartier-Bresson, he never sent me any pictures." And at one point Magnum [Photos] put their archives online and if you were a photography professional you could log in and I am a photography professional.

Rauschenberg in his Lafayette Street home and studio, New York, 1968. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Photo: Henri Cartier-Bresson

[INTERRUPTION]

Rauschenberg: So I logged in and put in keyword Rauschenberg. And up popped—there were a couple of other things that popped up—but basically here were all these Cartier-Bresson ones. So I went through and I picked out the one that I thought was the best one, which was my dad standing in the kitchen with this big, very iconic clock behind him. One of the very simple ones with the minutes, seconds, everything, which was funny, I don't know why he'd want such a detailed clock, he never got anywhere on time. Or within an hour of on time. Anyway, so I said, "Okay, for your birthday I'm getting you one of these prints." I think it was for his birthday. "And I think this is the right one, but let me know if you'd rather have one of the other ones." And I just printed out off the Internet with big sort of watermarks, Magnum watermarks across them. [Laughs] And he said, "Yes, that's nice." So I sent him that. That was nice, that was nice too. I might have missed the dinner with Cartier-Bresson, but at least I finished Cartier-Bresson's homework as well as my own. [Laughs]

Q2: That's a good full circle moment. So some of these other photos, having seen photos of you from India, some of them are taken by someone like [Gianfranco] Gorgoni or maybe [Sidney] Sid Felsen's taking photos. But an early photo like this, is this just a bystander taking this and it's the two of you going on trips like this? Or is this someone else who might have been?

Rauschenberg: This one I don't know. I don't remember this exact occasion. There are pictures that my dad took of me; there are pictures that my mom took of us. And it wasn't like now,

where everybody's got a phone in their pocket with a camera in it and everybody's handing them around and taking pictures of everybody else, and with selfie sticks. I just got back from Mexico and I never saw so many selfie sticks in my life. But there were a small number of pictures. There weren't a huge number of pictures, so if you look through the contact sheets that my dad had, there's not a huge number of pictures. Which is funny because I've gone on record saying that the more pictures you take, the better you get. [Laughs] He was shooting 2 1/4 camera and you tend not to take as many pictures. And of course, nobody takes as many pictures then as they do now.

Q2: Right, that's true, if your rule is true, everyone's getting a lot better.

Rauschenberg: I think they are too.

Q2: So going forward, we're probably more in the early seventies or something like this. I'm not sure.

Rauschenberg: Yes, this is sweet. This is certainly the seventies and this was before I started trimming my beard. Actually my wife used to work in Seattle and at one point I went up to Seattle when she was up there. She had never, and she still has never, seen my chin. But she'd never seen me with a trimmed beard and I went up and had trimmed my beard kind of like it is now and I walked in the door and she screamed. [Laughs] It was funny. But anyway, no, this is the sort of nice hippie times and the sixties, because the sixties mostly happened in the seventies. And there was such a lovely connection. My dad was so much a part of this sort of worldview,

the hippie worldview, in a way. He certainly wasn't a hippie exactly. I certainly was, [laughs] but there was this nice feeling like we're on the same wavelength. To feel like not only he and I are on the same wavelength, but that the larger society was too—that was nice.

Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 1975

Q2: And that's interesting because I think for a lot of people then, one of the fundamental things about the hippie thing was that it was this firm generational divide, it was this way of saying I'm not like my parents or I'm different in some way. So it's interesting that you say that you had this sort of kinship through that period.

Rauschenberg: Yes, well Black Mountain was a hippie commune. [Laughs] I don't think [Josef] Albers would agree. [Laughs] But yes. No. I think there was a sense of openness and curiosity and never mind how you're supposed to do it, let's just figure out we want to do it. Never mind how everybody else does it, let's do it the way we think it ought to be. And if the world isn't the way we think it should be, which it isn't—the Vietnam War is going on, horrible stuff is going on—let's live our lives as if it was. Let's make the changes that we think need to be made and

we'll just lead by example or make our own little island, whether you think it's positive or negative that we did that. I became vegetarian. He wasn't a vegetarian; that was an area of difference for sure. But there was a sense of it's up to you to rewrite the rules that he was absolutely committed to from his core. [Laughs]

It's like when he was making what he ended up calling the Combines. People were freaking out, is this a painting or a sculpture? I can't look at it until I know what category it is. And he said, "Well, if Calder made mobiles, these are Combines." Okay, now I can relax, I know what category to put it in, even though it's a made-up word that you just did that means farm machinery. [Laughs] Nonetheless, now I understand, now I can relax.

I think all the way through there was always—I talked earlier about how there was this twenty-year time lag, where it took people twenty years before they could figure out what that work was about, to get it and understand it. I think there was a sense of that in society too with the hippie thing, you're a vegetarian, you're kind of back-to-the-land-ish, and all these kinds of things that have caught on. Twenty years later they become much more standard in thinking about ecology and stepping lightly on the earth. Well it took a while. My dad did the original Earth Day poster [1970] and helped it along. But I think there was a sense of how do we think things ought to be, let's just live that way. I think certainly that was his view. How should things be in the art world and I'm just going to be that way.

Robert Rauschenberg
Earth Day, 1970
Lithograph and collage
52 1/2 x 37 1/2 inches (133.4 x 95.3 cm)
From an edition of 50, published by the American Environment Foundation, produced by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

Q2: That's a great parallel. So here's another one, which seems like it's about from the same time.

Rauschenberg: Yes, this looks like Captiva. I used to go down to Captiva every summer and winter and hang out with my dad. Usually bring in a bunch of my friends with me. It's kind of funny. My college friends are still my best friends and we used to go there all the time. They're really used to Captiva and now they never go there. I think they—Jimmy was doing something in Florida and was like can I go by Captiva? [Laughs] Sure. Oh well, it didn't work out this time, but at some point, I'll sneak him out there. But yes. No. We had a great time down there. For me, there was a wonderful sort of freedom because it was a terrible place for me to take pictures. It was this tropical paradise with white sand beaches and blue skies and palm trees. I'm supposed to teach you that this is an attractive thing, I don't think you need me for that. It's the one place that I would go where I was kind of off-duty [laughs] as an artist. I never consider myself to be off-duty. I have a camera in my pocket. I don't take pictures every single day, but the majority of days I have taken pictures. Actually I should go through it and look on the camera, it organizes

them by day. I could see how many days were blank, but yes. I think just to go and hang out and there was no particular pressure to do any particular thing. I talked earlier about how amazing it was to go in the studio when he was working and watch him make work, but then that was sort of a natural rhythm of not much happening during the day and the TV is on and nobody is watching it. Particularly at this age [laughs] my dad was lying out on the beach kind of sunbathing, which was an activity, which was later replaced by going in to have [laughs] little cancers removed. [Laughs] But yes, there was this nice rhythm of everybody just hanging out and then we're going to go make amazing art and then we're going to go hang out some more.

My dad was the original foodie; he was quite a good cook and he loved to cook. He grew his own hot peppers and he made a fabulous pumpkin soup. [Laughs] He was always having truffles—various people would send him really good truffles and all that stuff. He was usually into all this stuff. He wasn't somebody who was really excited about money, giving you status symbols. He didn't want to have bling [laughs] and all that kind of stuff, but he liked to have great food. That's where the money came in handy. [Laughs]

And he really loved Captiva. When we first went to Captiva, we stayed at the South Seas Plantation, which is the sound end of the island. Captiva is a long skinny island like a pencil. South Seas Plantation was like the eraser and the little metal ferrule that holds it in and he was worried that it was going to spread up the island. And it would have. And so he had his property and he just went all the way across because he was on the beach, he went all across on the bay and he talked to the people who own properties and said, "I'd like to buy your property, I don't need it. So why don't I buy your property, I'll pay the taxes and everything, and you just live

here. I don't need the place, you live here. And here's why I'm doing it. I don't want the plantation to come." The combination of these people also didn't want the island to be swallowed up by the South Seas Plantation and you're going to pay for it and I just live here. [Laughs] So he ended up with this band cutting off the South Seas Plantation.

Now, of course, all of those buildings that he bought from all of those people that he didn't need at the time, we now are running the artist residence program and we have ten bathrooms. We can have ten artists there at once and they each have their own bathroom. And it is something. They don't each have their own whole building, but it's nice. It's a good mix. It was his idea that there be an artist residency there when he wasn't there anymore. I don't know at what point that was his idea. I don't know when he thought of it. When he was buying up all these properties, I don't know if he had the idea of eventually I will have a use for these. But I do know that the print shop building that he bought, that he had the printers and everything set up, the two presses set up in the garage. He had Untitled Press [Inc.] and he had people like my mom come down and made prints there; David Bradshaw, all these people came and made prints there. So he did have this idea that these spaces were not just for him to use. But I don't know at what point he realized that it was going to turn into an artist residency.

Q2: Yeah and that's the amazing thing. I went down there and Matt Hall took me around and it's all there, which was remarkable.

Rauschenberg: And we keep improving, we keep adding to it. We just added a real sound studio, where previously we just had a room with some soundproofing in it, but not enough

soundproofing. In one of our test residencies, we had a performer who was doing an audio book of one of her long-form pieces and she couldn't do it during the day when there were other people in the studio because the sound bled in. And so they made a deal like okay, we'll only work in the main studio during the day and you can have it at night. But now we have a real sound studio. We had my dad's original painting studio, which we used as a dance studio, and we thought it had a dance floor and the first dancers came in and they said well, this is okay, but this is not a dance floor. So we got one. [Laughs] So we're constantly asking what do people need?

One of the things that we've figured out is that people who have never made silkscreens before, they almost all want to learn how to make silkscreens. It's my dad who did all this silkscreen work and here you are in his studio and it's something that's really easy to learn and pretty easy to do. And so it's one of the things that at each residency, Matt says, "Okay, who wants to learn how to make silkscreens?" Almost all of the artists do something that's outside their existing practice. They almost always at least learn how to do something, whether they go back and do something that's part of their practice or not. A lot of them, they end up coming away doing ceramics that they've never done before or making silkscreens that they've never done before. Or welding, they learn how to weld, do some welding work. It's great.

Q2: I think that's true, that place does have that diversity, creativity, and the resources for it. Here's another one from the seventies—

Hisachika Takahashi and Robert and Christopher Rauschenberg during the *Bones* and *Unions* project, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Sidney B. Felsen © 1975

Rauschenberg: This is from India— Yes, this is when they were figuring out about the pieces that are made out of what they called mud, which was paper pulp. Mud with turmeric in it. This is at the Sarabhais' place and they're figuring out how it works, they got a demonstration. So I was still there. Most of the time that I was there, I was at the Gandhi Ashram and the paper-making part of the operation, but we talked a lot about that.

Q2: Perfect and this is another one, which I know is from Ahmedabad.

Robert and Christopher Rauschenberg, Asha Sarabhai, Suzanne Felsen, Pal Babu, Charles Ritt, Sidney Felsen, and Robert Petersen working on Rauschenberg's *Unions* series (1975), studio at the Sarabhai Retreat, Ahmedabad, India, 1975. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni www.gianfrancogorgoni.it

Rauschenberg: Yes, this is making these. These are the big chunks of mud, of paper pulp and mud, and you can see they have camel whips coming out of them here. I talked earlier about when we ran out of camel whips, send me, I'll go get some. That was my version of sightseeing, on the way to the camel whip store.

Q2: Right, yes. I talked to the Sarabhais about how much of that visit took place within the compound or within the Ashram or something like that.

Rauschenberg: Yes and that's where Bob mostly was. I'm trying to remember who else was at the Gandhi Ashram with me. Now I can't remember, it's funny. I would say it's too long ago, but it was forty years ago. Maybe it was [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi]. I don't know, I can't remember. But the bigger part of the crew was making the more sculptural mud pieces on the Sarabhais' compound.

Q2: This is not India, perhaps a little bit later, but if there's anything that comes to mind about that.

Rauschenberg: Yes, so this is around the table. Bradley [J. Jeffries] and Bob Petersen and the whole crew. My dad always—he was an artist in New York and he was going to Max's Kansas City, before that going to the Cedar bar [Cedar Tavern, New York], all this kind of community. And he was very interested in community. He wanted to be in a group all the time. And then off he goes to Captiva where there's not a big group of artists hanging around all the time that you can go to their bar. [Laughs] So he kind of put together—one of the things that was funny was

that my dad's employees, half of them were in New York and half of them were in Captiva. The ones who were in Captiva were basically on call [laughs] twenty-four hours a day to hang around and let's drink and let's talk and all this stuff. And they had this companion part of their jobs; whereas the ones in New York were much more sitting at their desks and doing work. [Laughs] It was this very schizophrenic thing. My dad drank a lot so for people who were prone to having drinking problems, they would have been better off working in New York.

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But it was nice and I said earlier, from Portland, when I would call my dad, I would try to call him on the weekend because he didn't have so many people around then. It was more like where is everybody?

Q2: And so that's a typical sort of dinner that might've been happening in Captiva then?

Rauschenberg: Yes, yes, this is a typical Captiva dinner. It was funny too, because sometimes there was this little Island Store, but basically if you needed some real groceries, it was a significant drive over to the bigger store. [Laughs] So if we needed something, wanted to make something for dinner, didn't have enough of something, he'd grab somebody and be like go get some avocados, go get some whatever. And they'd come back and being a normal human being they'd get like two avocados. He would say, "No, no, no, what if we suddenly have twelve people over for dinner? When I send you to get avocados for dinner, don't get two avocados, get twelve avocados!" [Laughs] You probably know this from the movie, but they had mango trees

and they were always having mango. And they would prepare frozen mango and have zip-locked bags of frozen mango in all the freezers.

Rauschenberg and crew, Beach House, Captiva, Florida, 1980s. Pictured, clockwise from bottom left: Christopher Rauschenberg, Eric Holt, Bradley Jeffries, Emil Fray, Bette (Vitkowsky?), Darryl Pottorf, and Robert Rauschenberg. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Rauschenberg and crew, Beach House, Captiva, Florida, 1980s. Pictured clockwise from bottom left: Bradley Jeffries, Bette (Vitkowsky?), Darryl Pottorf, Robert and Christopher Rauschenberg, Robert Petersen, and Eric Holt. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Now in the residency program, we're moving to a new system of having a chef-in-residence and our initial chef-in-residence who set the program up for us is making all this stuff out of star fruit, carambola, because we have carambola on the property. It's like okay, so I'm canning all this carambola jam and making this and putting it in this sauce and that. It's fun to see that kind of coming around. My dad actually had a garden behind the print shop for a while. There's plenty of sun, but there's not really soil, [laughs] there's sand. [Laughs] There's not quite all the nutrients you need, but yes, he had a garden down there and he was into all this kind of foodie back-to-the-land stuff. [Laughs]

Q2: That's great. This is another one, which is just a little bit more cryptic. It looks like I might have another one from that same kind of scene actually so maybe we can deal with them as a set.

Rauschenberg: Yes, in the original Beach House, the structure of all Bob's houses was always the same. There's a kitchen, there's a kitchen counter, or at 381 there's a kitchen table, and that's where you hang out. And then there's the rest of the place [laughs] and that's where you don't hang out. [Laughs] There's maybe a Ping-Pong table there and some artwork hanging on the walls. But basically everybody hangs out in the kitchen. This dinner is actually sitting at a table. [Laughs] So it's a little bit more fancy maybe than usual. But a lot of the times people were just hanging out and just sitting on the beanbag chairs and sitting on the little counter.

The original Beach House had a very small counter because it was a small house [laughs] and it had stools and that was typical. In Bob's later house across Laika Lane, the larger version, had a kitchen with a big counter. And then a big space that had plenty of room to hang. You could put seven big paintings up or something. It had a sofa in there, but nobody ever sat on the sofa. I think every now and then if Janet, my wife, couldn't take any more TV, she'd go over and read on the sofa for a little bit and kind of wet her hair and let her brain cool off from all this TV assault because he always had the TV on. But so this kind of, let's all go in and sit down at the table and have a meal, wasn't always the way it was. But it was a nice crew. It's a great, great bunch of people and I think you really enjoyed them and really counted on them. And if they wanted to go have their own lives, he was like, "What do you want that for? [Laughs] Hang out with me." So—

Q2: It looks like he might be making a speech or toast there or maybe he's just serving something, not sure.

Rauschenberg: Oh, yes, I don't think he's really making a speech, but he might be serving.

Q2: So here's another one. In here we're getting more recent.

Rauschenberg: Yes, this is the house that he moved from the original Beach House into. You can see the giant kitchen that I'm talking about. There's this island here and then a big kitchen counter around it. That's where there were just stools around all that. He was on the inside part of it and everyone else was sitting on the outside of this counter that was, what was it? It was L-shaped and the short part of the L was maybe 4 or 5 feet and the long part was probably 20 feet. [Laughs] I don't know. You don't see it in this picture, but down at the end there were all these kind of power objects [laughs] that were stacked up down there, just this huge group of them. He had certain sort of power objects that he had in his pocket all the time.

Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg, Captiva, Florida, 2000s. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Q2: Like?

Rauschenberg: Oh— A special silver dollar, this Egyptian eye. It was all these kind of things that he accumulated. And you would basically just sit there and hang out and that was where everything happened all day. You would get up about noon and the TV was on and it was on CBS on a weekday and his soaps would come on the thing and then it would just sit. It was on all day and it would just sit on CBS all day. Nobody actually watched it or turned the channel. When I was down there, I would say, "Oh look, here's an interesting movie that's on one of the other channels." He'd say, "Yes, who cares." [Laughs] But then on the weekend, once there was more cable TV and not just the three channels, [laughs] then they would have the Food Network on, on the weekends. The Food Network. That he would actually watch a little bit.

Q2: Once the rest of the country had caught up with the foodie thing twenty years later.

Rauschenberg: Yes, but it was interesting because that's how all his places were. Like I say, on 381 Lafayette Street, there's a kitchen and a kitchen table there. And then that's like twenty percent, no fifteen percent maybe of the third floor. The other eighty-five percent of it was just a big open space with a mummy down at one end and a little greenhouse. That's where everything happened. At one point we were talking about selling the building at 381 because it's not really super well-suited to be Foundation headquarters.

Q2: And this is in the last seven years or so?

Rauschenberg: Yes. We were talking about that and we've kind of gone away from that now, but at one point we were talking about it and people said well, isn't that too hard in terms of sentimental stuff and everything? I said, "Well, when you're a non-profit, you have to make the right decisions whether you're sentimental or not." But it's a public asset now. But I said the thing that I would do if we bought another building is take the great big cast iron stove, take the table, and basically make a replica of the kitchen because that's where everything happened. The other 4.85 floors of the building were just not that important. And for a while after he bought the building—it was a few years after he bought the building when he bought the land in Florida and moved down to Florida. But for a few years there, it was his main studio down in the chapel. I don't say the rest of building is nothing really, but in terms of what would you be sentimental about, it was that small room.

Q2: That was the heart of it.

Rauschenberg: Yes.

Q2: So I have another photograph here. This one's more recent yet; maybe ten years old, I'm not sure.

Rauschenberg: Yes, so this is after his intracranial bleed. He's in his wheelchair. I think this is probably at an opening. I'm not sure which one because it's too generic a space around it. But his main nurse is there, Janine Boardman, she's the one who traveled with him. He had 24-hour nursing after he had his intracranial bleed and he was in a wheelchair and stuff. And she would

travel with him and just be on duty twenty-four hours a day and otherwise, there were shifts. Fredericka Hunter is there, who was one of his dealers and is a board member on the Foundation. I'm there and it looks to me that I'm wearing a suit, so it's going to be an opening. Bill Goldston is there in a suit. And that looks like [Robert] Bob Whitman; it looks like his back, but I couldn't testify to that. I don't know Whitman's back perfectly. But yes, when he was going somewhere for an opening of a show, there would be usually a pretty good gathering of the clan.

Often his mom and his sister would come. Dora and Janet; Janet's husband Byron typically wouldn't come. He liked to hunt and fish and he wasn't really into all this art stuff. So he wouldn't come, but usually Dora and Janet would come and really enjoy it. Janet actually understood about the art; Dora didn't really understand about the art at all. You probably know about the story of nailing the paintings up to protect the picture windows from the hurricane. You know this story, yes? So she called up and told him that she'd nailed his paintings to keep the windows from breaking in the storm and he said, "Okay Mom, there's only one thing I want to know. Did you put them up face in or face out?" And she said, "Oh no, I wouldn't want the neighbors to see them." He said, "Okay, that's what I thought."

Dora Rauschenberg with her "storm shutters" made from Rauschenberg's early paintings, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1992. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Philip Gould

But anyway, he loved his mom and he took really good care of her and it was great. But she didn't understand it. But she liked coming to the openings and seeing everyone make a fuss over him. She'd get all dressed up. She had a good sense of style and made her own clothes. My dad was a grown-up before he had a store-bought shirt. It was exciting to him, his first store-bought shirt that wasn't made by his mom. And she was very frugal, she would make everything herself to save money as well as for whatever other reasons she did it. I think he had that—I think that served him well. He had a real sense of keeping—you've got to use everything and don't waste things. Even when he had a lot of money, he didn't really want to spend it on himself. It's like I can get some things done with the money.

There's this story about him watching one of these infomercials. It must've been on CBS. At night, there was a thing about trying to raise money for leprosy. And they said there are two million people with leprosy and they could be cured for fifty cents each, give money. So he called up his accountant and he said, "Now, they say there's two million people with leprosy and they can be cured for fifty cents each, that's a million bucks, right?" And yes. He said, "Okay, let's do it." So there was this kind of directness, this sort of childlike directness of oh, they need that money, I have that money. Give it to them. To me, that's absolutely beautiful, that's so great. I guess there's probably turned out to be a couple more people with leprosy because I think there are still some people who have it. We needed a few more fifty cents maybe. But just the idea that whatever, wherever the need is, it's not like well, I'm going to give away a little of mine to help that. Okay, that's where the need is, so let's do it. I mean, he flew first class; he flew a lot. He liked to fly first class so he wasted some money there and he spent more money on eating than he needed to. He liked eating in fancy restaurants and like I said, he liked to cook

with fancy truffles that people gave him. But really, he didn't really understand greed, which I don't either. Happily—I'm happy to not understand it; I prefer not to understand it.

Q2: That's great. And this is one more of the two of you. I've seen that one before, it's especially nice.

Rauschenberg: Yes, this is a picture that my wife Janet took. This is up in Vancouver. We went up there. Vancouver, British Columbia. He was having a show up there and we drove up with one of my friends who did Blue Sky with me, and Janet and I. We drove up there and hung out and had a great time; it was nice. It was funny though because it was at Thanksgiving time. And he was so excited to be out of the country at Thanksgiving so he wouldn't have to eat dry turkey. He was so excited about it, and they had a big dinner for him on Thanksgiving, one of these ones where it's everybody who gave money to the museum, it's like a fifty-person dinner—and especially for him because he was American, they got turkey for everybody. And he was so annoyed because Janet and I were vegetarian, we got this beautiful Indian food, and he was like, "I want that, I don't want this stinking turkey." I think he'd actually told them he was excited about not having turkey too, but they didn't care.

But Vancouver is pretty far north. And that time of year it was very dark and we kept thinking we were going to go out and photograph together. But it would be noon and we would look out the window and it's really dark. It wasn't like the midnight sun. It wasn't that far north and maybe the windows of hotel were tinted too, I don't know. But I could take a light reading out the window and it's a thirtieth at F2 or something; it's pretty dark out there. We ended up never

going out and photographing. Since then I've photographed in Vancouver, but that was a little disappointing. We needed a little bit more light.

We had a funny thing too on that trip. We went to the Vancouver Zoo and as we were walking toward it—my dad didn't go—Janet and Terry and I went. And as we were walking towards it, we heard this Balinese kecak music, which I don't know if you know kecak. Anyway, it's this very distinctive music. [Laughs] It's a ritual. And as we're coming up to the zoo, we're hearing this thing and it's like okay, that's kind of wild. We enter the zoo and there's a crowd of people around the bat cage and I don't know whether it's the music or whatever, but the male bat is very excited and he's trying to have his way with the female bat, which boy if you want to talk about creepy sex—

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: Go to the bat place when they are—anyway. And then we kind of walked on and we were like, where the heck is the kecak? It's one gibbon making this thing that in Bali they take eighty men to do. He's kind of racing around the trees doing this [singing] sound. And it was absolutely crazy, it was wonderful, it was absolutely my pinnacle zoo experience of all time. Now I've gone to Africa and looked at animals in their native habitats, so that was even better, but it was really pretty amazing.

It's funny because my dad was super curious and he loved to travel and get around and see things. And he would walk around and photograph and pick things up off the street and, "I want

to use this and collage this." But there was also this aspect of—he hung out in the hotel a lot. So it's like okay, well let's go out. Oh no, I'll just hang out here. So for the zoo expedition he wasn't there. We could have gone out and photographed probably even though it was kind of dark out, but it's like oh, if there's an excuse not to, it's kind of comfortable here. I'm away from my comfort stuff and why don't I just hang out a little? There was this funny sort of balance there, where he would go stay with headhunters but then, when we're somewhere else, he might just stay in the hotel the whole time. Funny, funny mixture.

Q2: At ease. Okay, perfect. So we have another stack of photographs here, just see if there's anything that comes to mind on review. They're a bit different than the last set.

Rauschenberg: Yes, there's these various sort of show announcements and shows that I had. I would always send my dad something. And here's a postcard that's sent from Italy. Here's a very wild looking letter that Janet and I sent, it was two-sided so there's a lot of bleed through of this crazy red writing going every which way all over it. That's all this sort of friendly [laughs] stuff. It's not any major information being covered, just kind of here's what we're doing and here's some drawings and here's some this and that. A complicated diagram of some sort here. [Laughs]

It was a funny thing because it was very hard to maintain continuous communication at that time the way people do nowadays. So basically, what people usually bemoan, saying the lost art of letter writing, it wasn't something that people chose. Why don't I do letter writing? There weren't that many alternatives. A phone call was expensive, a long-distance phone call was

expensive. You could write a letter and often people would go off to Europe with this aerogram, little thin papers that you would fold up into an envelope, or you'd just send postcards or something from there. You basically weren't in touch with people who weren't in the same place with you then the way people are now, constantly sending text messages and all this stuff. There was no equivalent of that back then. In fact, when we started our gallery in 1975, there weren't answering machines. There were five of us running a gallery. If we wanted to get together and have a meeting, it would take twenty-five phone calls to set it up. "Well, what about Tuesday?" "Oh no, he can't do it." "Okay, let's start over, what about Wednesday?" So we would go to a system where we had a standing meeting every week because otherwise you could never figure out how to get together. It used to be Wednesday night and now it's Tuesday night actually, we changed it. But that's it. Keep that free [laughs] because it's too hard to figure out when you're free otherwise.

I think it's nice for the Rauschenberg Foundation archives that there are some letters, postcards, that kind of stuff. That's great. They have telegrams, they have all kinds of funny things that people used to communicate. But we would mostly talk to my dad by phoning him up. Like I said earlier, I'd mostly call him on the weekend and just hang out and talk, "How you doing?" But when I was first going to college, I didn't do that very much, so it was very much binary; it's either I'm far away and not in communication with you or I'm staying at the Beach House. [Laughs] It was more schizophrenic that way, but that was just the times.

Then, of course, whenever I would have a show somewhere or something, I would send him the announcement. With Blue Sky, we're having a show every month, we're sending posters every

month. There was this sort of rhythm through the mail too, of the actual news. And in addition to going and seeing him in Captiva, he would have a show somewhere and I would go meet him there. A show in San Francisco at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I would go down there and hang out the whole time he was there. So that was this funny, different, it wasn't a coordinated, one way of here's how we're communicating with each other. It was more like okay, now I'm at your house for a while, now I don't see you for a long time. [Laughs] Now, three months later, we're all at this place where you're having a show, we're hanging out together, now I'm gone again for a few months. Now I'm in New York and so are you and we're hanging out. So it was very much that way with these phone kind of things.

But it's funny because I talked earlier about going to his house and just hanging out and waiting. Was there an opportunity for us to really talk about something interesting or are we just sitting in front of the TV that's going on all that time, but we're not really watching? I think the just hanging out in case there's a chance to have a really interesting talk is more powerful than calling up and okay then that's, what are you doing?—what are you doing? It's not the same as what you might find yourself talking about at one in the morning. That's the most fun. Or what's really the most fun, which I said earlier, was hanging out in the studio when he was making work. Just watching that whole process.

Q2: And are there any further photos that bring anything to mind? Or does that carry us through the lot?

Rauschenberg: What we have left here is pretty much show announcements. There's a nice, crazy letter here. A crazy letter here with three little cutouts from contact sheet pictures on there and rubber stamps. That was when he was in Chicago for a show and we didn't go to that one, so we sent something to the Art Institute [of Chicago] like hey, we're thinking of you. [Laughs]

Q2: Perfect. So unless there's anything further you'd like to say in closing, I know I'm sort of pinch-hitting in here at the end. But if there's anything about what you've talked about today.

Rauschenberg: Nothing comes to mind. I think we've covered a lot of ground. Let me just think for a second if there's anything. Well, one of the things that I haven't talked about, I'm sure some of the other people in the other oral histories have talked about, was Bob's dogs. But really, I mentioned it briefly earlier. His original dog was Laika, named after the Soviet space dog. And then Kid was his second dog and Kid and Laika had a son, Cloud, who was this big black sort of cloud. [Laughs] And the dogs were great and then he had other dogs after that, a whole series of dogs that were kids of various combinations of things. At one point he had seven dogs, I think. And they were really kind of family. This thing of like okay, I'm not at Max's Kansas City, but I've got my dogs. [Laughs] He loved them. The original three dogs, Laika, Kid, and Cloud, had this thing they would do at the beach, where one of the dogs would find a stick that was about the right length and chew it down to two-and-a-half dog muzzles wide. A two-and-a-half dog muzzles long stick. And then they had this monkey in the middle game that they would play, running up and down the beach with two of the dogs hanging onto the stick and the third dog trying to get on the stick, which would ultimately involve knocking one of the other dogs off, who would then try to get on it.

Rauschenberg walking his dogs Kid and Star on the beach, Captiva, Florida, ca. 1984. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Terry Van Brunt

So I thought that was great because it was actually toolmaking. There's this whole thing about how man is the only toolmaker. This was toolmaking and not only was it toolmaking, it was the highest form of toolmaking, which is toy-making. [Laughs] But yes, he really loved the dogs and they were a big part of his life in Captiva.

And he had very sweet friends down there. Maybelle [Stamper, née Richardson], who was the artist who was down there, and he bought her property and she lived there for a very long time. She was very reclusive, she was into a bunch of metaphysical funny stuff, but he loved her. It was great. And Dodi [Booth] the postmistress. There were all these people down there who were sort of his crew that he put together, his clan.

Q2: That's great. Well thank you so much for your time today, for sitting down and sharing all your memories with us.

Rauschenberg: Thanks, my pleasure. It was fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]