

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Laurie Anderson

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Laurie Anderson conducted by Alessandra Nicifero on October 23, 2015. This interview is 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: ATC

Session #1

Interviewee: Laurie Anderson

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Alessandra Nicifero

Date: October 23, 2015

Q: Okay, so first let me say, today is October 23.

ANDERSON: 2015.

Q: 2015, incredible. My name is Alessandra Nicifero and I'm here with Laurie Anderson. I'm thrilled and honored to be here and I would like to know more about your life growing up in Glen Ellyn [Illinois], is that what it's called?

ANDERSON: Yes, yes.

Q: I always have this image of suburbs, the "province of the world," that all look alike, but learning that this was a rich suburb outside of Chicago makes it quite interesting. I learned a little bit about what kind of child you were, quite brave and reckless. [Note: This interview was conducted two days after the release of Anderson's film *Heart of a Dog*, 2015.]

ANDERSON: I think an awful lot of kids are like that, especially when you're twelve and you get a bike and you get to ride it all around and that becomes your way of learning the town. It becomes your escape from childhood and your house. Also most twelve-year-olds are punks and they want to get out into the world even though their respect for adults has recently plummeted. I

think a lot of twelve-year-olds feel sorry for adults. They seem so clumsy and uninformed and rule-bound, so you as a free twelve-year-old are a different kind of species than they are and it takes a while for puberty to kick in and really mess you up.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: Then you become a young adult and it's quite a long time until you get around to appreciating adults. That moment of being twelve, on the cusp of getting out of childhood, was really wonderful for me and it made me do things like go to Chicago every Saturday. I would get my violin and my paints and sketchbooks and get the train to the Art Institute [of Chicago] that had a lot of classes for kids. They still do. I was just in Chicago a couple of days ago and went to the Art Institute just to check around and they have new giant wings for teaching children and that—in 2015—is a really wonderful development. So I was very happy as a child to be there.

There was nothing more wonderful than walking through the Art Institute. On the way to the school, you had to walk through fifteen different galleries—Egyptian art and they have a great collection of Impressionism and you, with your little sketchpad on the way to the greasy studios, you see all these amazing works of art.

[INTERRUPTION]

ANDERSON: In the afternoon, I would rehearse with the Chicago Symphony [Orchestra]—wait, no, sorry, it was the other way around. The youth symphony started at ten and went to one and

then I would have a little lunch break and walk across the street to the Art Institute. So it was a perfect day. Saturdays are still my favorite day of the week because of that actually. I got married on a Saturday because I thought, of all the days of the week, that's the most free to me, that's the most connected to music and art and ideas and feeling so inspired by being at these places.

Q: So you had seven siblings—were they all involved with artistic activities or playing musical instruments?

ANDERSON: No, they were all doing all sorts of things. One is an anthropologist, one is a banker, two are horse trainers, one is a teacher—let's see, what else. The other two, the twins, they study various things and work in small ways here and there.

Q: Yes. They must be grateful—

ANDERSON: They're very special people. Much of my job as a child was taking care of them so I really loved that job actually, for the most part. Now, it didn't feel— Actually I've never really thought about it, beyond what I just said. I saw them a couple days ago and we talked a lot about their role in the film [*Heart of a Dog*], which they've only seen a little bit of. They didn't come to the screening, which is okay with me because I don't think that I would want to— If I were in somebody's film as a little child, I might not want to see it in public for the first time. Now I would never ask them to be part of a Q&A afterwards. I think they're just private people, they're very private people.



Laurie Anderson
Heart of a Dog, 2015
still

By a strange circumstance, I was given this film by another brother who said, “Can you just transfer this for me?” I found this footage of them in a stroller being pushed by my mother and myself ice-skating, the kind of lost winter world that I used to live in. It was very cold in those days, in the fifties in Chicago. The snow would come, it was in huge banks all winter and icy winds—it was deep, deep winter. So there was that winter. It reminded me of a time that I had been pushing them in their stroller and their stroller sank into the ice. So I called them and I said, “Guys, do you remember that day that I almost drowned you?” Now they were two at the time, but they’re identical twins so they have a kind of outboard brain and the other person is like— So they remember a lot more than you do when you’re just alone. I was eight at the time and they were two and they said, “Yes, we remember that.”

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: I said, “Well, I just found this footage of you and your strollers and Mom and me and the island and the lake and it was an icy gray day.” And they said, “You’re not going to put

that thing in the movie are you?” I said, “Well, would you mind?” They said, “No, that’s okay.” They’re very big-hearted. Anyway so there was the story, which was an element that I had been looking for, a way to conclude some of the threads and ideas in the film, which is about partially how we love and what love is. We also then had a really intense conversation about my mother because I said, “You know, I said in the film that I didn’t love Mom and I just wonder how that would be if she were alive.” They both said, “No, she would love that.” She was very, very formal. She didn’t talk about that kind of thing. She didn’t have a love relationship with her own mother as she kept pointing out to us. It’s such a taboo to say that.

Q: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: In almost all cultures, across the board, to say that your mother didn’t love you, even worse is probably to say that—

Q: You did not exactly love your mother.

ANDERSON: I meant the other way around. It’s difficult to say that you didn’t love your mother but even harder to say that your mother did not love you. That’s a very presumptuous thing to say too. A mother can say that maybe, about her own child. But it’s not considered acceptable. So these people have an obligation to the human race that nobody else has: unconditional mother love. It’s not something that everyone can scrape up out of the bottom of their heart, except in milliseconds; and there is a millisecond that everyone can find, where it is absolute, pure love. That was what I was looking for.

I didn't use the more extreme example that Tibetans sometimes use to generate compassion because it's a film about a dog and it's a film about empathy. There is another exercise for people who say, "I just don't care about you, I don't care about you or anyone else really." You say, "Really? Okay, try this." There's a little dog, a really sweet puppy, and he's bouncing around and dancing and twirling around and everyone says, "Wow," just absolute joy. The puppy is surrounded by some kids and other people and one of the kids throws a stone. And then other kids start throwing stones. And then everybody starts throwing stones and they stone the puppy to death and you watch this. And your heart goes towards this little puppy and that is it. That's the case in which almost even a psychopath is able—for a second—to go, whoa, to generate a strand, a little thread to another being. So obviously in *Heart of a Dog* you can't use an example like that. [Laughs] It's too sad. But it is a film about many kinds of love.

My brothers in the end basically said that she would have really liked that I made it because she was very achievement-oriented and that it was coherent because she was a very brilliant person and she liked lots of things connecting and she loved books and ideas. She was also a painter and a violinist, but couldn't do it very much because she had all these kids. So anyway in the end, that film was about her. However because it's difficult for people to actually even recognize that, even if you say, "Mother: picture her, stories about her." Everyone is going, "Well, tell us about the death of your husband [Lou Reed]," because it's easier to talk about a rock star than a touchier thing, than that—

Q: A complex relationship with your mother.

ANDERSON: Mothers. Yes, yes, it is. Even though I couldn't have been more billboard-like in saying this.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: What it's really about is glue, right? It was like, "It's about you too. It's about love in general," and I said, "I'm not doing this so you can get to know me better. This is not a biopic." This actually is not. It's about how you tell a story and why you would tell it. What happens when you forget it? What happens when you repeat it? What is it to use words to identify yourself and what is it when you realize how fallible they are?

Q: Yes, I love your idea of memory and how memory works almost as an editing device when we return—

ANDERSON: Yes.

Q: We change, modify, clean up.

ANDERSON: Of course.

Q: Have you discovered over time that when telling stories your editing device works differently and changes?

ANDERSON: Of course, it's always changing.

Q: It's always changing.

ANDERSON: And depending on who you are, you're defining that part of your life in a very different way. You're seeing it in a different way. You're interpreting it, speaking about it, invoking another part of yourself perhaps to remember other than language. That's why I use those very fast words in the film too, to address the part of you that never speaks. That's just a kind of—I don't have a good word for it—a silent witness. The person who is even listening to you as you're speaking and going, "Just stop talking like that, please. It sounds idiotic and pompous."

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: But you're in the middle of the sentence and you can't even listen to that person.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: Someone who's consistently there and has been since you started to breathe, but who is very rarely addressed. So I try, through unvoiced words, through the eyes, to find that person.

Q: You said something about the difference between ideas and art and how ideas are more connected to the brain and art needs to sneak through the senses and I thought, in this regard this movie is—well because it's art—but it really connects to a different way of perception and a different way of seeing and watching movies. It involves less and less the sight at a certain point and more other parts of your body that are not necessarily engaged with the eyes.

ANDERSON: Well, a couple of things about that, technically. Right in the middle of this film is a book. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*—which often there's a book in the middle of a project whatever the project is—and this one is subtitled *Great Liberation Through Hearing*. So hearing in the sense that this is in a way a radio play—but it's also how hearing can become a way to hear the past differently. So in the story I told about being in the hospital and repeating it and then in the middle of telling it once, I had almost a hallucination through sound of hearing the way the hospital was at night. Not seeing it, but really hearing the sounds of the children and the sounds that the nurses were making. That became so real to me that I began to remember the rest of how I felt. So when a sense comes back and it's not mediated by words, it's just pure sensory information of things that were— Obviously it's also called suppression, in a way. A different way of telling your story. It's a story you can tell, not the story that actually happened. So the story I could tell as a twelve-year-old was that doctors were idiots and I was so clever and I was reading these books while they were reading baby books and so, yes.

Q: And you were very confident about your future, that you were going to walk again of course, it was obvious?

ANDERSON: Yes, they were idiots. That was a story of course that I had to tell. And I remember that as a twelve-year-old remembers the story. It's like when I go back to Chicago, I remember the walk from the trains, I remember where the candy stores are and the trick stores, and I'm an adult. But I'm remembering seeing it through a child's eyes. Disappearing ink and plastic dog poop. I loved those shops—

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: So I knew where they were. I didn't know where the other stores, the bookstores were, but I knew where those were. So I remembered that was the story of a twelve-year-old that I was just repeating. I guess you'd have to say adults were idiots because they did put all these kids together in a ward and think, "Ah, they'll be fine." It's not fine to listen to another child dying. You will never forget that. Never. I guess we were just thrown in for convenience or whatever. So hearing was a very important aspect of this movie.

Second were strings. So there was not going to be a music score really until I was at the Rauschenberg Residency [Captiva, Florida, 2015] where I decided to put some music on it. I had a month to tinker around with that, so I did the whole score there. Setting up my computer, playing violin, adding other things. One of the things that I realized at that point was your eyes need to stream over the cuts so anytime there's a beat, it relates to the visual cut. There were only two sections in there very briefly with beats. I began to understand why film scores are strings. It frees the eye to look around the frame and not be influenced by—beat is cut. Your eyes flow over the cuts there and they look around the frame in a more easygoing way. So you're exploring

this thing in a way that you don't when you're constricted by tempos; tempos meaning beats and like dump, dump, dump, cutting up the picture, cutting up the thing. Creating expectation, creating memory within the frame cuts. I wanted to make a much more easygoing flow from scene to scene; also because it's a collection of short stories, so they need to.

Anyway, at the Rauschenberg Residency, I was given a dance studio and I was very happy in there. Even though I was just off in the corner doing music. It was wonderful to be in a big space. I'm originally a sculptor. So I tried to activate it as much as I could. I had been asked by Deborah Hay to do a score for her work, *Figure a Sea* [2015]. So I put some things together. Now Deborah's kind of notorious for not ever using music, even though she asks people for it. So when she asked me, I said, "Deborah, you're famous for not using music—

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: —so why are you asking me to do this?" She said, "No, no, I would use yours." I was like, "Okay," and so she came to the studio in Captiva to listen to some things. I was at that point kind of running out of time. It was not really enough time to do a whole movie score and I had to finish the vocals too. It was the whole soundtrack. So I was working around the clock.

So Deborah came and I played some things that I had in mind for her dance and she moved around the studio a little bit and she was like, "Oh, that's good, just it needs to be a little quieter." I said, "Okay, I'll pull it down." Moves around, listens, checks it out. "Just could you make it a

little bit quieter? A little bit softer?” Then she was like, “A little more, a little quieter.” Then finally she goes, “That is perfect. Just perfect.” I said, “Deborah, that’s off, there’s nothing here.”

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: And she goes, “Really?” I don’t know if she really played this at Cullberg [Ballet, Norsborg, Sweden] last month, but she was going to play it in Sweden [note: premiere performance at Dansens Hus, Stockholm, September 24, 2015]. We’ll see if anybody heard anything.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: It’s probably in such whispery levels that no one did. And that doesn’t matter to me. If she’s only really hearing it in her own head or not hearing at all, I’m happy to do it, because I love her work and wanted to hear her ideas and see what she thought about things. I do like that about collaboration—that you get into somebody else’s world where everything needs to be really soft [laughs] or loud or whatever, just to find a different aesthetic.

Q: So going back to living in Chicago and moving to New York at a certain point to become an artist, you went to Barnard [College] and then to Columbia [University] to study sculpture. What was your perception of the city when you came to New York?

ANDERSON: The perception of?

Q: The city. Just roaming the city. How different was it from Chicago?

ANDERSON: Well, I can't really compare them because I was in Chicago one day a week as a kid. I never lived in the city so I didn't know the city as a place to live. Only as a place to visit and that's deeply different. In a sense at Columbia I was also living in a very sheltered part of the city and a university, which is its own little community. I might as well have been in a small town in many ways. The way that a lot of people treated the city and the university, they didn't leave. I quickly learned that I wanted to have a very light presence in school so I would just split my life. I got a studio downtown and decided I was going to have my art life elsewhere because I found that the university was really wonderful for academic stuff and just awful for being an artist. I thought that these do not go together at all. The people I began meeting in the art world had a different attitude to schools. I always loved schools, but I was able to split myself into two in that way for a while and do a little bit of both before I became an artist.

Q: And you were already interested in Buddhism back then in the seventies?

ANDERSON: In the late seventies. That was a lot later. I went to do my first Vipassana sessions in the mid-seventies. That really was a question of focus. It was a question of focus and pain, actually a combination of them. By that I mean, a friend of mine had had a lot of trouble concentrating recently and he was just very scattered, everything was all over the place. He said that he had gone to this Vipassana place and he had been able to use his mind like a beam. It could focus here and move it there. It was very flexible and I thought, "Whoa, I want a mind like

a beam.” So I went to this ten-day meditation and they came in and at the beginning they said basically, “You’re here because you’re in pain.” I said, “No, I’m not. I’m here to get a mind like a beam,” and they said, “No, you’re here because you’re in pain.” And I said, “This is a very bad way to start—

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: —this argument.” But gradually I realized that it was about that and that anytime something happens and you don’t scream, you put that somewhere, you store it. The storage areas are really sophisticated and you could actually feel them go to those places sometimes. Anger going right to your jaw and it clenches and you’re like, “Whoa, I just saw it go there,” and that makes it continually tense. Or sometimes loneliness goes right into the shoulder and the shoulder comes up. Or fear in the stomach or wherever it is, you are a walking mass of pain.

[Laughs]

Vipassana is about trying to retrieve experience through pain instead of, as in psychoanalysis, through language and stories. I trusted that much more than finding it through words, much more. Because in words I found that they were all slippery and they were all constantly sliding and to say the truth you had a million impressions that were fighting those words. How it felt. How you remembered the way you saw it. The words were not addressing those things. They weren’t addressing how it really was. They were just some kind of glossy thing that represented something. So the point with Vipassana is to find those places and then unravel them with another energy, preferably kundalini or any way that you could find to get in and just let them go

a little bit and find where, for example, loneliness is and what it is and how it is. Maybe not what it is, but it's not about fixing it, it's about recognizing it. And in recognizing it, it begins to evaporate. It just wanted a little attention.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: You look at it and it goes, "Okay, I've been here your whole life."

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: Thank you for seeing me.

No matter what work I'm doing, it often hinges on not only the ability of language to elucidate, but its fallibility. So for example, with this work, *Habeas Corpus* [2015], much of it was learning another language, which was legal language. In other words, learning that all of these detainees in Guantanamo [Bay Naval Base, Cuba] were—and I obviously won't go into the background of this because you can do that in some other way, because we'll be here for too many days—but the reason that we could treat people in Guantanamo the way we treated them was because we immediately designated them as non-persons. How we got the right to say you're a non-person was very vague. It was never really defined, how we got the right to say that. We gave ourselves the right to say that you're a non-person and from then on they were treated however we felt like. My collaborator, Mohammed el Gharani, was tortured and he was there for almost eight years, from the time he was fourteen until he was twenty-one. So he really lost his young manhood to

prison. How he was able to survive is something I really have enjoyed studying; he's not pretending it didn't exist because he often breaks down. But in general, he is able to be funny, charming, open, and very, very, articulate about it. That is a magnificent achievement.

War gave me the opportunity to be a friend of someone who was a goat herder in Saudi [Arabia] and then had this horrendous experience that brought us together in a way that was, for me, really life-changing, just to be able to listen to a story and say, "I am going to make a portrait of you, try to make a portrait of you, one that is as true as you would like it to be. It is your story, however you want to tell that story." It was a different relationship to stories than I'd had before, and it had to do—there's always a relationship to truth in telling a story. Even if you're writing fiction you want to find some way to make it not just some crazy sci-fi who knows what; although that's a very big word that's very hard to interpret. [Laughs] Truth. Sci-fi can be very truthful writing too. Anyway we won't go into those depths because again those are the fine points of filing away on words.

Q: So you said in the past that you grew up as an artist at the Kitchen [New York], as a musician at the Kitchen? Can you describe a little bit the community in New York in those days?

ANDERSON: I just recently heard Brian Eno discussing this in length. I just got the book *City on Fire* [2015] too.

Q: I'm looking forward to reading it, yes.

ANDERSON: Yes. We'll see. I'm almost reluctant to read it because I don't want my memories tinkered with and I don't want to start seeing that era through the filter of this person's writing and I'm susceptible to that if the writing is good. When your story gets told, I'm just thinking of suddenly Paul [Benjamin] Auster and Sophie Calle. Paul had somebody called Sophie in one of his early books, I forget what it was [note: *Leviathan*, 1992]. It was a story of a woman who followed a man to Venice and wrote about him. It was Sophie Calle's early work and he credited her in the foreword of the first edition but didn't ask her if he could use her story. They knew each other. In the second edition he didn't credit her. Her life was in there as fiction and she said, "Paul, I need you to say that that's me in your book." That that's her real life you're talking about, "Here's why. Because when I'm telling somebody about what happened to me and they go, 'Gee, that's just like that character in that Paul Auster book.'" She said, "That's why I'm telling you that you need to do this." He did not do it however.

So all of these things get mixed in our minds, of fiction and reality, and I'm surprised that we're able to tell the difference at all. I think that authorship is a very sticky thing. I'm thinking of somebody who was just telling me this dream. "Oh, I was in the mountain pass, it was so beautiful with thick clouds. It was nighttime, it was really dangerous and I was so afraid. I was this little person walking through the pass," and I have to think, "Wait a second. Who do you think invented that beautiful mountain-scape? Who made those giant clouds? Who wrote that? And who wrote this, how come you said you were going to be this little helpless person? Why did you cast yourself in that role? Did you forget that you're the author of all of this?" [Laughs] You're telling it like a movie you saw last night. Accept the authorship of the way you see the world and through what filters you're seeing it.

So when I talk about or think about being an artist in the seventies in New York at the Kitchen, there were a number of stories that I would haul out. I would listen to Brian haul out some of his stories. Obviously you can only talk about them in the sketchiest of ways unless you've really gone into it. And so in a way I almost find it ridiculous to try to say something about it. But if I were going to say something it would be that it was a moment when—predominantly my memory of it is that we helped each other a lot in making work. Sculptors helped painters helped dancers helped musicians and everybody was interested in changing the world. Nobody thought they would ever be paid for this ever. So it had that kind of innocence and lack of competition because no one would ever make a dime doing this. If there was competition it was who could go the furthest in terms of ideas. But generally I have memories of that time as largely that. Of generosity. That's one of my favorite times to think back on because of that.

Q: Is it probably part of being young, younger, and being twenty-something?

ANDERSON: Yes, yes. I think so. I'm not sure that's the experience of that many people now because they're living in a very, very different art world. They're living in one that's a corporate world and one in which—a lot of parents used to think “Oh, my son the painter, oh no.” Now they're kind of going, “Good, my son is going to be a painter. He'll open a London office any minute and become a branded symbol of whatever style he's going to do.” So it's considered a wise career move to be an artist.

Q: Do you think that this change happened at a specific time, like in the mid-eighties, late eighties?

ANDERSON: Oh, I don't know. I'm sure that there were shadings of this in the fifties too, of a blue chip art world. It just wasn't the art world that I was in. It was further uptown. I'm talking about dark downtown SoHo in those days and not the art world in general. However the art world in general also has had a huge overhaul and it's gotten to be, I bet it's a hundred times as big. When you think of how many artists there really were, there were like sixty artists in SoHo. One gallery, one restaurant. There weren't thousands. There's maybe a thousand artists in SoHo. We were living in isolated lofts, turning our lights out at night so we wouldn't be discovered. It was a very, very small scene.

This is one of the great values of living so long; you go over to SoHo and it is an absolutely, deeply different place with only a few threads left over from that time. That's really pretty fascinating. It's not just about regret; it's about being awed by the amount of change that a part of the city or much of New York City, much of it has changed. Until last year we had a wall of windows looking out onto the river and I looked at the river nonstop and now because there was a Trump Tower built next door, we had to brick in our own windows. That is a harsh sentence [laughs] to carry out. You have to actually physically put the bricks in.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So do you have a memory of actually seeing Rauschenberg's work first or meeting him?

ANDERSON: I probably remember being over at his place more than seeing his work frankly.

And mostly they were parties, wild parties, and I remember—

Q: I've heard about—

ANDERSON: —them being full of this Southern joy. A lot of people had come from a lot of different places and New York was where we all experienced our freedom. I'm thinking of Jene Highstein, [Philip] Phil Glass, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark, Bob, Richard Nonas. Let's see. [Susan] Susie Harris, Tina Girouard, [Richard] Dickie Landry. These are all from radically different parts of the country. Radically. And everyone brought this almost international feeling to New York. So suddenly there's Tina cooking gumbo and somebody else who is coming from another pretty different kind of culture.

Also in the seventies, the thing that is easy to forget is that it wasn't that far from the sixties. There had been created a communal culture called the counterculture, which we all were part of. That was why we wore those clothes, that was why we ate that food, which was largely kind of a weird health food. That culture had its own clothes, fashion, music, philosophy, political stance, and spirituality. It came filtering into the seventies in ways that were really interesting, especially into the art world, and that's also how different strands of Buddhism got there as well. Not only through [John] Cage and [Shunryu] Suzuki, but also through people who approached their art as a meditation. It was about extended time. It was about a very long form; Trisha Brown crawling up the buildings. It required focus and it required the same kind of duration that you would use in

a Phil Glass rehearsal, which you'd be there for eight hours. So it was a radically different sense of time. You'd also go over to somebody's party and you wouldn't be there party-hopping for twenty minutes. You'd be there for five hours. Everyone had more time, that is one of the biggest differences. Everyone had more time to hang out. It wasn't cut up by gadgets. It wasn't.

As I said, people helped each other a lot. If I had to have my floors sanded—actually a lot of people worked on this floor. [Laughs] I was here in '75 and you wouldn't think that much of it if somebody goes, "Hey could you help me sand my floor this weekend?" Can you imagine asking your friend these days, "Could you sand my floor this weekend?" He'd go, "Are you kidding me? Here are some recommendations for sanding companies." You would not ask them to do that. Would twenty-year-old kids ask each other to? Yes, probably, but not as much as we did, I don't think.

Q: I love the idea of Gordon Matta-Clark having this restaurant where he would invite people to come in and cook and make sculptures out of food. [Note: In 1971 Matta-Clark, Carol Goodden, and Tina Girouard co-founded Food in SoHo.]

ANDERSON: Yes, Gordon was really social. He was essentially a social artist. He was a social engineer. He was an architect really, so he was doing social architecture. That included parties, and food and hanging out and making films and driving around in his pickup truck. Just being with people. Not isolating himself. He was very outward bound.

Q: It was very moving also how he chose to die with friends and have friends around him.

ANDERSON: Yes, yes, yes. It was a very communal feeling. I spent part of the seventies on a commune as well. A lot of the sixties ethics were part of how we were living then and that part I really do miss, I have to say. The community of that group. It didn't mean that we couldn't all express ourselves individually in the most specific way. We did. But then I think personal style began to be much more of a big deal, how you had to invent your style, do your style, repeat your style, keep going on your style.

Q: So the collaboration for *Set and Reset* [1983] with Trisha Brown and Rauschenberg was accidental, was part of being friends and working together or you were asked?



Robert Rauschenberg
Set and Reset, 1983
Photographs, printed reproductions, acrylic,
and pencil on illustration board
16 x 16 inches (40.6 x 40.6 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

ANDERSON: Trisha set that up. Bob and I didn't work together at all on that, not for a second. He did the set, I did the music. I probably saw him at the opening, but we did not work together.

It's called a collaboration, but it wasn't. It was Trisha's energy that put that together and it genuinely came out of her relationship with Bob, which had a much longer history than mine with him. I knew him through parties, I had never worked with him, I didn't know his work that well. It was not the kind of work I was attracted to at that time. I didn't have a feeling for it. I liked him a lot because he was sunny and I liked that. I was attracted to it. But not to his work.

So the collaboration—I think it worked. I can't really remember that much about it. I worked with Trisha extensively on the score. She showed me the work that was all about falling. So I began to use that as a metaphor for the way that sound would behave in the score and the way things would just keep falling off of bells and phrases. But maybe I'm just saying that now because I can't remember if I really did it like that. I know I remember thinking I would try to. Was it really like that? I don't know. I worked with her again on a couple of other things, which I really did enjoy because I did feel very close to Trisha. Even though I didn't know her well, I had enough interaction with her to really feel love for her; she was just so—slightly wacky. Even later when often we would be talking and we'd be having a wonderful conversation and she would say in the middle, “What is your name again, dear?”

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: And I just wanted to hug her.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: Because she always has this kind of sweetness, spaciness, and sense of wonder and pleasure that, as words left her, she continued to have. That's a really amazing thing. It's really amazing.

I really love words. I value them. I value the part of your mind that's activated by language, but also, when it leaves, there's still a lot around. There's a lot around your being that's still moving. So I was very happy to see that. Part of it of course is probably confusing and frightening, but I think she was a very brave and adventurous artist. Things that might be frightening to other people she would almost find interesting [laughs], so her work as an artist probably helped her a lot, as her ability to speak left her. I was happy to see that.

Q: How was your experience in Captiva as a place?

ANDERSON: Well, as soon as I got there, I wanted to leave because I didn't like it at first. I thought, "Oh no, I'm going to have to go to dinner with all these people every night? This is too overwhelming; there were too many people." I thought, "I can't relate to this. I don't want to talk to people, I just want to—" Also the house was filled with smoke, which was making me gag and I was like, "Oh god, I can't smell smoke." It was so hard. Then I realized, I'm just going to see if I can ask this person if she would mind smoking outside, but I felt that was such an imposition and then I thought, "Outside is big, just ask her."

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: So I said, “Would you mind smoking outside?” She said, “Of course, I don’t mind.” I was like, all you had to do was ask.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: So stop sitting there being resentful. As soon as I realized that I could talk to people or not and that other people felt the same, I was happier and then it was easier to talk to people and get to know them.

There were a few people, particularly Anne Bogart, who I knew a little bit before but I just really loved hanging out with her. I didn’t really know Ann Hamilton so I got to know her a little bit there too and she brought her dog and we had a lot of really good conversations actually about what we were trying to do. There was Somi [Laura Kabasomi Kakoma], who also was my roommate, a singer, really wonderful, from New York/Nigeria. It was a really interesting group. It was nine women and two American-Indian men and they were both really good at hunting and fishing.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: They would go off and hunt and fish and throw things back and I said, “Guys, this is really corny.”

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: And then I began to appreciate what they were doing and watch them canoeing and I thought—what a wonderful thing. They were also both really, really good artists. I thought, “How have I landed in this little Martian colony of people who are beyond different from each other?”

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: “Who curated this group?” [Laughs] But I was very happy to be a part of it as soon as I realized how wacky it was and how many of the people had a very similar, if not the same approach, to how they felt about sitting with other people at dinner. We all kind of went, “Okay, well—let’s give it a shot.” It became really interesting.

Probably for me, the most valuable part of that experience was being able to get uninterrupted time so that I could just get up and not have to make phone calls and not have to figure out how to get from here to there or have this or that meeting. Meetings were all canceled. They were all canceled. I actually did retool my work ethic in that time.

Q: For how long were you there?

ANDERSON: Five weeks. It’s an interesting amount of time because I think you could probably get a lot done in two weeks. I probably would have loved eight weeks. I think everybody there probably would have also, slightly longer. When it goes into three months then you have to

cancel too much of what you're doing, I think. It makes it very hard if you have other things going on. They just stop. You can do a little bit remotely and everyone did try to stay in touch with their studios and their collaborators or whoever. Generally the kind of peacefulness and really the beauty of the west coast of Florida is very different from—you've been there, right?

Q: No. I haven't.

ANDERSON: Oh, that's right, I asked you that. You should go. You should just tell them that you need to go down there. Stay in the Fish House.

Q: Okay.



Fish House, Captiva, Florida, ca. 2014.
Photo: Laurie Lambrecht

ANDERSON: It's a wonderful thing to do. I'm so grateful to Bob and his [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation for thinking of that. To do that with an artist's studios is really beyond generous

because they were saying, “Oh, do you want to do any screenprints?” “Yes. I’d love to do some screenprints.” I love screenprinting and photography and prints of all kinds. I got to do a lot of big drawings. Mainly I was doing the score for the film.

Q: So the drawing, the animations were already made?

ANDERSON: Yes. The images had been done and the picture had been cut and locked. At that time I had just screened it for EMPAC [Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York]. I was an artist in residence there. There was no music on it and people said, “Please, don’t put any music. It’s so hardcore with just a voice,” and I thought, “They’re right.” I thought, “That’s interesting, but then again I am a musician so—”

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: I can always take it off. So like I said, I set up my laptop and played. I just didn’t want it to be manipulative and of course it is manipulative. I thought, “Okay, I’m just going to think of it as another emotional aspect of the film. The violin has always been my sidekick anyway so it ended up in there. It really was because I had that time to look at it and just play through it in a very easygoing way and just kind of go, “Does it need another voice? Does it need that voice of the violin?” And I realized it did. I liked having this other—because that’s what the violin is for me, it’s the equivalent of spoken voice, but it’s the one that’s crying. So there it is. Yes.

Q: It's interesting that you associate it with crying. You said crying, right?

ANDERSON: Yes. Many people associate a violin with crying. Yes.

Q: For me, it's much more of a joyful voice.

ANDERSON: Okay. It can be, it certainly can be.

Q: More than other instruments I associate it with body movements. Many musical instruments are close to the body, but the violin especially. And it's in between the rest of the body and the head, so it's in this position. So before we conclude, is there any question that I didn't ask that you would love to answer?

ANDERSON: [Laughs] Let's see. I do want to say one more time that when an artist dies and you try to think of what to do with his work, this was a really great idea. To give it to other artists is just a generous idea, very deeply embedded in the way art comes out of other art. To be around Bob's place, I also think people absorb Bob's work ethic. I think that actually came from Bob, so I want to thank Bob for that.

He had this little chair set up also that was between my house and the place where you got food, so I often stopped and sat in it. It was a chair in the woods where you see a little glimpse of the ocean but mostly you're surrounded by trees. The chair is deeply embedded in the ground. It

must go down 10 feet or something, it's not going to fall over. It's just a single chair and I spent a lot of time there and I thought, this is a place that Bob picked as a really good place, just a little glimpse of the water, but surrounded by these amazing trees. [Note: referring to a site on the Captiva property that was set up as a posthumous memorial to Rauschenberg by friends and studio staff] So I was always talking to Bob, thanking him. And especially for that.

I would work with people there who worked with him and they would say, "Yes, Bob would get up, read the paper, have his coffee, and do a couple of hours of meetings and business. And then he'd have lunch and then he would work all afternoon, take a little dinner break, and work way late into the night." That's not my particular pattern because I don't like to spend the first hours of my day on a meeting. I'd rather try to use those hours to make something. But I really appreciate that he didn't ignore that part of being an artist because you can't and still be an artist. You really have to figure out how to make it work and how your work fits into the culture, how you're going to pay your rent. He was addressing that. So you got to really see how he lived in a very practical way. And also that he really cared about food. That really expressed itself in the residency. There was a lot of care towards cheffing it up.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: It was really very nice, beautiful food. You could feel Bob's love of food and you could feel his happiness all around you. Is there any better way to pass on your work habits and your love of making things than to just live in a place where somebody would?

His studio in New York was cool and he always sent me limes from Captiva. For many winters, I've gotten limes from him. Like I said, we weren't friends, but I guess he sent limes to a lot of people and I was really happy to feel that he thought of me and maybe just that I needed some vitamin C or something, I don't know.

[Laughter]

ANDERSON: But he sent me these limes and I always wondered where that would be; he had gone an awful long way in Florida. It just seemed to me like a really bad idea. It reminded me of Miami and Fort Lauderdale and most of the places in Florida I don't like. But the west coast is magic. Manatees, swamps, we had the greatest time canoeing through swamps, and old gas stations and guys in old silk floral-print faded shirts, [laughs] fishing guys and beautiful, beautiful birds. I actually love cold weather but that winter, last winter, January was—were you here?

Q: Yes.

ANDERSON: So you remember January and February?

Q: Clearly.

ANDERSON: So it was really cold.

[Laughter]

Q: Miserable.

ANDERSON: Yes. Whenever I talked to people in New York, I tried very hard not to say, “It’s 78 degrees and I just came back from the ocean.” I just didn’t say that. That’s about what I remember from that. Again I don’t want to say it too many times, but I really—I also have to think of what to do with Lou’s things and all the things he left to me. He didn’t have studios and things like that, but I am trying to think, based on what Bob did, of something that I could do with Lou’s things that would help people in that way. It’s not at all on that level, but I know that he loved young artists and he loved people trying things.

We went out every night to see things and many were by people who were just starting out and trying things out. He was much more generous than I was; we’d see something and then I would go, “God, could you imagine how someone could do something so—?” And he would find one or two things and he would go, “Yes, but look what they did.” It never failed to astound me how generous he was with seeing that effort; it was the one thing they were trying to do, he would pull that out and he would do that in talking to people too. He would say, “That one thing you did—” But he was tough and one example I always think of is when we were playing a benefit and everyone was playing together on a stage and there was a lot of coming and going in between things. There was a violinist who did a solo. She had played with Lou sometimes. She was a pretty good player, but she was I don’t know. She played a solo and as she passed on her way out of the stage, she looked at Lou kind of like, “What do you think?” He said, “Is that all

you've got?" She left and about half an hour later, she had to do another solo. She went back out and she just killed. She went down and scraped out the bottom of her heart. She really played. Then she passed him again and he goes, "That's what I'm talking about." So he forced people; he said, "Come here to play. Don't just come here." I watched that in so many different guises and ways, appear in a world where I just kind of thought, what if there was some way that that attitude could be given to other artists?

Q: Communicated, transmitted.

ANDERSON: Everyone has that in themselves of course, but he had that big time. [Laughs] He really did. I better get going.

Q: Sounds like a very good practice. Okay, thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]