

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Virginia Dwan

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Virginia Dwan conducted by Sara Sinclair on December 1, 2014. 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.

Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Virginia Dwan

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: December 1, 2014

Q: Today is December 1, 2014 and I'm sitting with Ms. Virginia Dwan at her home in New York City. To begin your oral history interview, it would be wonderful to hear a little bit about you, about where you were born and some of your early memories.

Dwan: I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota and I went off and on to many different schools, but primarily there in Minneapolis. When I graduated from high school my mother and I went to Los Angeles and I entered UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. I only stayed there a year because I married and had a child and went back to various classes but not as a full-time student until much later when I went to Sarah Lawrence [College, Bronxville, New York] here and finished my degree.

I married twice. In the second marriage, I told my husband that I really wanted to have a gallery. He was a medical student and finally he didn't want to hear it anymore so he said "Please let's go tomorrow and find a realtor and find your space." So we did that. I didn't really know artists at that point. I didn't know too much about what I was doing although I had sat in for the art dealer at Frank Perls Gallery in Beverly Hills [California], but I hadn't learned a great deal. Mainly just how to sit there and look intelligent with the art.

I did open then on Gayley Street in Los Angeles, in Westwood Village more precisely, and had some wonderful shows there including Rauschenberg's first L.A. show, which was Combine paintings [*Robert Rauschenberg*, Dwan Gallery, 1962]. Then I opened another gallery, which was less of a store, more of a gallery, on Broxton [Avenue] and had among others a second show of Rauschenberg's, which was mostly drawings [*Rauschenberg at Dwan*, 1965]. His transfer drawings. That marriage dissolved too and so my daughter and I came to New York and I opened my gallery here in New York. There was a period where the gallery in Los Angeles and the gallery in New York co-existed for two years. John Weber was managing the Los Angeles gallery while I was in New York.



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg*, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1962. Works shown are *Black Market* (1961), *Navigator* (1962), *Pantomime* (1961), and *Coexistence* (1961). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: I. Serisawa



Robert Rauschenberg
Umpire, 1965
Solvent transfer on paper with silkscreen ink
and printed reproductions
35 x 31 inches (88.9 x 78.7 cm)
Private collection
Exhibited in *Rauschenberg at Dwan*, Dwan
Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965



Robert Rauschenberg
Promise, 1965
Solvent transfer on paper with silkscreen ink
31 x 39 inches (78.7 x 99.1 cm)
Private collection
Exhibited in *Rauschenberg at Dwan*, Dwan
Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965

In New York I really found my groove. Although I opened with the [Edward] Kienholz show, Barney's [*The Beanery* (1965), an environment based on Barney's Beanery, a Los Angeles bar], which was a great success, and went on to have another show, [*The State Hospital* [1965, exhibited in *Edward Kienholz: Concept Tableaux*, 1967] with Kienholz. I nevertheless became more and more interested in Minimal art and Minimal art was sort of the image of the gallery finally. So Minimal artists came to me and after a while I had a stable here. In Los Angeles almost every artist was on consignment from other galleries in New York. I had people that were only with Dwan Gallery at that point but Rauschenberg, for one thing, was showing with Leo Castelli, so it sort of went without saying that I would not be showing Rauschenberg's work anymore. He continued to be a friend and an influence in my life and I'm very happy for that.

And he introduced me to people like John Cage and Merce Cunningham who were very important to my thinking. So the gallery continued here and slowly but surely also involved Land art or what we called Earthworks. I handled four Earthwork artists' work. They were Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and Charles Ross, who were working out on the land. So that was another identity that the gallery had, was that it was the primary gallery for Earthworks at that point.

I did close in 1971. The whole thing became too overwhelming to me. I was really concerned with the artists and with their well-being and whether everything worked for them and I was very involved with that rather than just selling. So I closed the gallery thinking that I was going to be able to go on to another area—maybe writing, maybe filmmaking—and instead I did a bit of both, but primarily I was continually called to tell of my experiences with these artists from the past and it's become more and more so in recent years because so many of the principals have died and I'm still around to tell my story. That's what I'm doing today about Rauschenberg.

Q: Thank you. That's a wonderful overview and I'm hoping that maybe we can return and I can ask you some more specific questions about some of those periods that you've just talked through.

Dwan: Are you an art historian?

Q: I am not an art historian. I studied theater before studying oral history.

Dwan: Oh, theater. Oh, great.

Q: So if we could go back to Minneapolis, I would love to hear a little bit about your memories of your first experiences seeing art or being moved by art.

Dwan: My family was not directly involved in art—my mother had very good taste, but it didn't extend to paintings. One day when I was in my mid-teens—fifteen or sixteen—she said, “There's a show at the Walker Art Center [Minneapolis] of Wanda [H.] Gág,” who was an illustrator—she was an artist—a woodcut artist who illustrated a book called *Gone Is Gone [or The Story of a Man Who Wanted to Do Housework]*, 1935] which is a funny child's book and I was to go see the originals at the museum.

I went down there not having ever been to the Walker before and it was a great old mansion in those days. After looking at Wanda Gág's works, I wandered into the next room, which was a show of early-modern artists here in America. Among them were Joseph Stella and John Marin. I can't seem to remember who the other two were; there were four of them. And I particularly—after studying them quite a lot—decided I liked John Marin, which is interesting to me because his line quality, and the very pale look, is continued in some of the works that I showed later, so-called Minimal art.

Q: So you said that you had decided that you wanted to open a gallery. Do you have any other memories of those afternoons that you spent gallery-sitting for Frank Perls?

Dwan: Yes. One time, I was sitting in on a [Conrad] Marca-Relli exhibition and a critic came in and harrumphed a bit and said, “Oh, band-aid art.” I didn’t know what I was supposed to do about a statement like that, so I just smiled and he left and that was the end of that. I found interesting people coming and going; but actually, people were not rushing to buy for quite a long time.

Q: Do you remember any specific lessons that you took away from that experience of being in somebody else’s gallery and spending that time?

Dwan: When I first knew Frank Perls I visited his gallery and sat and talked with him over coffee and finally I said, “Well, I’d like to have a gallery myself. I really want a gallery,” and he said, “Oh, how much money would you like to lose?” I said, “Well, nothing,” quite horrified at the thought. And of course that was the way it turned out; that breaking even was quite difficult, let alone making any profit because I was showing the art I believed in and I loved and it wasn’t necessarily saleable.

Q: How did you find that first space?

Dwan: A realtor showed it to us, it was available and empty at that point so we grabbed it.

Q: And you just mentioned that you showed the artists whose work you connected with. How were you meeting those artists at the time?

Dwan: In the very beginning, my mother-in-law, who is an art dealer herself in Cold Spring, New York, sent me a few artists whose work she thought I would like and so they were the first two shows that I had. But after that very quickly word got around that there was a gallery that was looking for artists. Artists started coming in from Los Angeles. Also I was reading about the people in New York and in particular Dorothy Miller's exhibition at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art, New York], which was called *Sixteen Americans* [1959–60], and I was interested in a number of people that she was talking about and whose photographs I saw at that point. My sister-in-law was working with me, Eugenie Kliks, her name later became Eugenie Osmun, and we started taking turns going to New York, seeing what the situation was here, making acquaintances of the artists and finding people that we really wanted to show and that took off very quickly actually. Within the first year I believe Larry Rivers was showing with us, who was a well-known artist already.



Installation view, *Sixteen Americans*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959–60. Works shown are Rauschenberg's *Satellite* (1955), *Summerstorm* (1959), and *Kickback* (1959). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt

Q: How would you approach those trips to New York? Would you plan, you want to go to these specific studios or—

Dwan: It's a very long time ago, but I imagine that's probably what I was thinking, yes, that I wanted to make connections with certain artists and their dealers and see their shows and so forth. Then when I'd get here, an artist would say, "Oh, you mustn't miss such-and-such," so I went to additional shows. Little by little I was finding works that I really liked and realizing that a number of those artists really did want a show on the West Coast. They were showing on the East Coast and had been living here for a long time, but they wanted to see—well they wanted to see the land actually and to go out west. So I had something on my side to help there. And then I paid for their transportation. Very often they came with their works, as the transportation of the works were paid, as well as the rent and the announcements. So all that was paid for them, so it became very attractive to them I believe.

Q: You were also a keen follower of contemporary French art.

Dwan: Yes.

Q: And you were showing that in Los Angeles as well.

Dwan: Yes.

Q: Was there any conflict around you showing European art in your space? Did any of the American artists express frustration?

Dwan: Yes. Los Angeles artists had very mixed feelings I think. Some of them admitted that Yves Klein for instance was an influence on their work and important. John Baldessari said it was the most important show he ever saw [note: *Yves Klein: Le Monochrome*, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1961]. But the way I met the European artists was really in Europe. I was walking the [rue du] Faubourg Saint-Honoré [Paris] with my now ex-husband and we saw Yves Klein's work in a storefront window and it was absolutely mesmerizing. We went inside and spoke to the dealer, Jean Larcade, and arranged for a show right on the spot, to be sent from Paris to Los Angeles. However it turned out that Leo Castelli was also planning a show and so it went via Leo Castelli in New York. Leo has since wanted to say that he sent me that show [laughs], that he arranged that, but that wasn't the case.

Then Yves Klein introduced me to Arman [born Armand Fernandez] and I somehow separately became very interested in Jean Tinguely. Although he was showing with Leo Castelli—or he was “in the gallery”—he didn't actually have a show, as far as I know, ever. And neither he nor I felt that Leo was really devoted to his work. So I asked if he would be willing to come to Dwan Gallery. He was then under contract from that point on, contract for the United States. He was free to show anywhere for any amount in Europe or anywhere else, but for the United States, Dwan was to be it. So he came out and he built some things at the time in Los Angeles [*Jean Tinguely*, 1963], but he missed Niki, his wife at that time. So Niki de Saint Phalle also came and as it turned out she also did a wonderful show for me [*Niki de Saint Phalle*, 1964]. Then Martial

Raysse was introduced to me by Arman, I believe, but Martial was just about to go in the French service and so I put him under contract—meaning that I started giving him a small pension—and he was able to survive the service because he did end up in a hospital for a short time. After he left the service he was free to have his exhibition out in Los Angeles. So he came out and he then too was missing his wife so she came too, France Raysse. He made a number of works in Los Angeles, particularly the portraits done in fluorescent paint, spray paint. I had a little studio in the backyard and he was working in there and produced some remarkable works there. Actually I knew them in Europe more than here except when they came to Los Angeles, that was a different matter. We saw a lot of each other that way.

The Los Angeles artists had, some of them, anger at having French artists brought in. Also French artists were in disrepute in the United States. It was too academic for American tastes at that point and it was assumed that that kind of art was going to go on forever in France. Now all of these people were quite a departure from that academia and all very much rebels and doing their own kind of work, which was very different from what other Frenchmen were known for. But still, some of the artists didn't like the idea that they were French artists out there, I think, whether it influenced them or not.

Q: And what about the people who were coming in to see the work? Do you remember some of the reactions to it?

Dwan: Well the artists came in for one thing and there were only a few collectors really. Another dealer and myself used to try to pretend that there were more. At least twice as many, at least,

because there were only, oh probably—maybe ten and of course they couldn't buy from the other galleries and myself every month. It just wouldn't happen that way. So it was not a very exciting art market actually. It was exciting to be around the artists, but the art market was almost not happening.

Q: And was there a decent flow of people just coming in and out to see?

Dwan: Yes. Yes, people did come, particularly when I had the second space. They knew it was worth coming out to Westwood because the other galleries were mostly centered around La Cienega [Boulevard]. I wanted to be out there because my husband was in medical school at UCLA and it was right on the same land there. Also I felt that people from Bel Air, Beverly Hills, and Brentwood, adjacent to Westwood, would be a source of collectors. They weren't, but that's what my hope was [laughs].

Q: So you said that much of the work proved to be unsalable. How did you assess for yourself personally the success of a show?

Dwan: Oh that's a very interesting question. I haven't been asked that before. Some shows I didn't want to see taken down. I didn't want to see them wrapped up and sent away. They were works that I had lived with during that month—usually the exhibitions lasted a month—and I was very unhappy for instance when Yves Klein's show came down because I was used to living with that blue in the room and the whole space and myself included were permeated with blue. It was a very otherworldly kind of sensation, one that I wanted to keep. Of course Rauschenberg's

show was wonderful, of Combines there, and I felt in having a show of his work that I'd sort of attained something. At last I was playing with the big boys. That was true of so many other shows, but particularly somehow with Rauschenberg, I felt that it was very significant that we were having a show. And he came out—do you mind if I talk about him now?

Q: No, that's great.

Dwan: I was trying to reconstruct it in my mind. I think he was with Leo Castelli and Steve Paxton, who was Bob's lover at the time, Steve was a dancer with Merce Cunningham and now a choreographer. We all put together the show, but Leo wanted to be very much included somehow. It was to his advantage really to come out and meet collectors and see the space and so forth, but he was very nice and we all enjoyed ourselves.

But Merce and John Cage then came across the United States, all the way across I think—they may have started in Missouri or something—and drove in a Volkswagen bus. I think David Tudor was the primary driver, with all the troupe of Merce Cunningham's and their props and costumes. How that was done, I don't know, but they parked out in front of my house and started unloading and people just kept coming forever. It was like a circus act. They had been stopping in various universities along the way and concert areas and doing performances so they were spreading themselves and it was a wonderful situation. Merce was still youngish and the troupe was less known certainly. Even John Cage wasn't that known. This was in 19—

Q: '62, I think.

Dwan: '62. The first show was in '62. That's right. I got to know John Cage and Merce Cunningham as a result of asking Rauschenberg to come and show and they were very interesting people who continue to be very important to me to this day. John Cage particularly is a very important thinker and I made a film with him [note: *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Eric Satie: An Alphabet*, 1982] and I consider him to be one of the foundations of most things that are happening in New York now.

At one point I put the music people up in a little house that I had out in Malibu also, but further up and out of the Colony. I was asked to come to dinner that I guess John was making at the house. So I did and sat around with the dancers and John and Merce outdoors. And suddenly there was an explosion, just kind of poof that was happening in the sky and we were all silent and staring at it and it exploded again and poofed again and so forth. So we turned on the television, went inside to find out what was happening because I was afraid that it might be a—that some people might be being killed—and it turned out to be an unmanned missile that was exploded because it was misfiring and there was absolutely no news about it. The government simply ignored it as if it didn't happen, but to us it had tremendous impact at that moment.

Also I had a party at my house for the dancers around my swimming pool. Of course Bob Rauschenberg and Steve were there, and John Weber had by that time come to work with me. Anyway we had rock music on—recorded rock music—and the dancers were dancing to rock music and enjoying themselves thoroughly and getting in the pool and being thrown in the pool and drinking and all that sort of thing. And Merce sat by in dignified horror on the edge of the

pool because he didn't like the idea of his dancers dancing any style that wasn't his own style of theater dance. I don't think John—John Cage was always totally accepting of everything, it seemed. He really wasn't quite, but almost. Tried to be. The last time I saw Merce he had just received the Arts and Letters award from France and was very pleased about that.

I met [Elaine F.] Sturtevant through Bob Rauschenberg. He also introduced me obviously to John Cage. I went to the studio one day and John showed me—and John Giorno, the poet, who was there too—how to use the I Ching. So for some years after that I did do that and use that also, but it was his manner of arriving at chance in his operation. And so I visited his studio here in New York and I visited Bob Rauschenberg's studio. He and I were both Libras so somehow I had it in my head that we were very alike. We were in some ways. But I was in the studio one day when a neighbor—or one of the people in the building, one of his friends—was wandering through and I said, “Oh my gosh, you have so many people around you all the time. It must be very hard on you.” He said, “Not at *all*.” He was very annoyed with me and he said, “I love having people around.” I only realized much, much later that Bob was a very sociable and socially conscious person, both, and he liked having a lot of people around him and he was also very concerned that he do work that could help others.

At one point—actually we weren't seeing much of each other at this point so the story is sort of hearsay, but from what I understand he traveled around the world completely and in each place where he settled briefly, he made a transfer drawing using images that were local and in turn gave at least some of those drawings or lithographs to people locally, organizations locally, and took a few himself. But not that many. It was really so he could help humanity. His trip around

the world and doing work in different places that he was experiencing is to me totally admirable and socially conscious and just speaks of the person he was. [Note: Referring to Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI, 1984–91), a traveling research, art making, and exhibition program. See the *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* catalogue for the culminating National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. exhibition in 1991 for further details.]

Q: I wanted to ask you a few more specific questions about that 1962 Combine show; in particular your efforts to try to sell *First Landing Jump* [1961]?



Robert Rauschenberg
First Landing Jump, 1961
Combine: oil, cloth, metal, leather,
electric fixture, and cable on
composition board with automobile tire
and wood plank
89 1/8 x 72 x 8 7/8 inches (226.4 x 182.9
x 22.5 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Philip Johnson
Exhibited in *Robert Rauschenberg*,
Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1962

Dwan: Oh you've read about that. It must have been about that time that John Weber first came to work there because I remember he was involved in this. *First Landing Jump* was a wonderful artwork of Bob's—of Rauschenberg's—and it wasn't selling nor were most of the other things. As you can see we had a red dot next to one of the drawings and that's about it. But John and I

were convinced that *First Landing Jump* could be sold on the West Coast so he kept it. We shipped the other things back to Castelli, but he kept that out and sent it to Texas to two different collectors. At least two, maybe three. Each one of them turned it down and so it was shipped back to us in Los Angeles. And at that point we'd had it for a long enough time that I really felt I had to send it back to Leo.

Well Leo apparently received it, called [Philip C.] Phil Johnson, and said, "I have this great painting," and Phil Johnson came and bought it immediately and gave it to the Museum of Modern Art. Seeing that price list, the collector's cost would have been \$5,800. Of course allowing for inflation and prices in art going up in general and so forth, it's not really comparable today, but it is nevertheless amazing to think that the collectors would not have bought that for \$5,800.

Q: And *Black Market* [1961]? That was another piece that was part of that show.



Robert Rauschenberg

Black Market, 1961

Combine: oil, watercolor, pencil, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed paper, printed reproductions, wood, metal, tin, and four metal clipboards on canvas with rope, rubber stamp, ink pad, and various objects in wood valise randomly given and taken by viewers

49 1/2 x 59 x 4 inches (125.7 x 149.9 x 10.2 cm)

depth variable

Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Ludwig Donation

Exhibited in *Robert Rauschenberg*, Dwan

Gallery, Los Angeles, 1962

Dwan: Yes.

Q: Do you remember how it was received by the gallery? Did Rauschenberg assemble it himself?

Dwan: *Black Market* was the one with the little—

Q: With the box, with all—

Dwan: Well one of the photographs that we have shows a bunch of the artists waiting their turn to get to it and write something also, but I think it was primarily the artists who understood that there was something important in the work they were seeing.



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg*, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1962, with gallery visitors interacting with Rauschenberg's *Black Market* (1961). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: I. Serisawa

Q: Do you remember any of the objects that were in the box?

Dwan: No. I'm probably misremembering now. I thought it was paper and people were writing on pieces of paper.

Q: I think it was also the case that people were allowed to trade. They could bring in—

Dwan: Oh.

Q: —small objects and—

Dwan: Oh were they objects? Oh, I wish I could remember, yes.

Q: —take something out. Okay.

Dwan: That's a long time ago.

Q: Okay. And you said you shipped most of that back to Castelli?

Dwan: Yes, yes.

Q: There is someone at the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation who is especially interested in that piece and when it was shown at Oberlin College. Is that something that you recall at all, if that happened on its way to you or afterwards?

Dwan: It was probably afterwards and I don't remember what the story was there.

Q: Okay.

Dwan: I know that we would love to be able to show it, but we're not. Modern won't loan it [*First Landing Jump*], but at the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, D.C.] in 2016, there will be an exhibition of Dwan Gallery items, having been shown [*Los Angeles to New York: Dwan*

Gallery, 1959–1971, 2016–17]. There was a request for it, but of course—I shouldn't say of course, but anyway, it wasn't available to us.

Q: I wanted to ask you of your memories of the time that Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Jean Tinguely created the *tir* performances in front of your home in Malibu.

Dwan: Oh *tir*. Yes I do remember that. Well, Niki had shot a piece up in the Malibu Hills earlier and I had it installed at the end of my pool outside, but then of course with the ravages of sunlight it just eventually became very, very pale. Part of it was a chain that led to a little homemade cannon that Jean Tinguely had made. To inaugurate the piece, he put gunpowder in the little cannon and shot it out towards the ocean. So we did have a little boom there and of course that wonderful piece of Niki's.

Q: Maybe we can speak a little bit about the second show, the drawings in 1965. That was after Rauschenberg won the International Grand Prize in Painting at the Venice Biennale in 1964.

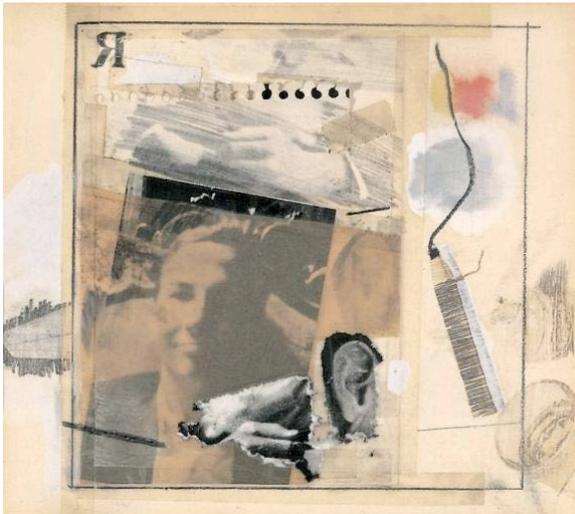
Dwan: Yes.

Q: So I was wondering how that was felt, if it was felt at all, that he was returning and he'd just won this major prize.

Dwan: I don't know. Actually I suppose some people were attentive to that idea. By that time I really did know him fairly well and he had made some drawings for the first exhibition in the old

gallery and he was so involved with these transfer drawings that I thought, well, if he had canvas with paper adhering to it, which I knew existed in France anyway, he could do these drawings and yet they'd be drawing-paintings in a sense. So I gave him a roll of paper on canvas that was adhered and that had been made in France. I'd like to think then that his transfer drawings later on canvas or on paper came somehow from my effect on him. But I don't know that it did because he was rather blasé about my gift. I'm not sure it made a big difference to him. But he continued to make some wonderful transfer drawings. Typical of Bob, my daughter was hanging around and he showed her how he did the drawings so she has the technique down herself.

We had a show of relatively small drawings. What were they? I suppose 16-by-20 [inches] and then a couple of larger drawings and then one canvas. One large canvas, which was—I don't remember very well, but it was a—



Robert Rauschenberg
 Untitled [self-portrait for Dwan poster], 1965
 Solvent transfer, ink, graphite, paper, and
 tape on paper
 8 x 9 inches (20.3 x 22.9 cm)
 Courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York



Robert Rauschenberg
Mainspring, 1965
Solvent transfer on paper with
pencil, watercolor, gouache,
cardboard, and tape
32 x 62 1/2 inches (81.3 x 158.8 cm)
Private collection
Exhibited in *Rauschenberg at
Dwan*, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles,
1965



Installation view, *Rauschenberg at Dwan*, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965.
Photo: courtesy Virginia Dwan

Q: It was called *N.Y. Bird Calls for Öyvind Fahlström* [1965].

Dwan: —a reference to his friendship with Öyvind Fahlström, the Swedish artist. By that time I think people had gotten over their surprise and horror at him and Yves Klein and Europeans were coming more regularly to the gallery, but not necessarily buying, just coming.



Robert Rauschenberg
N.Y. Bird Calls for Öyvind Fahlström, 1965
Silkscreen ink on cut-and-torn papers stapled to
canvas and covered with Plexiglas with hockey
stick, hose, metal garbage-can lid, antenna,
metal, spring, film canister, and chains
84 x 60 inches (213.4 x 152.4 cm)
Private Collection
Exhibited in *Rauschenberg at Dwan*, Dwan
Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965

Q: So this same year, 1965, you had an exhibit at the University of California in Los Angeles, the *Virginia Dwan Collection* show. Do you remember what Rauschenberg piece you included in that show?

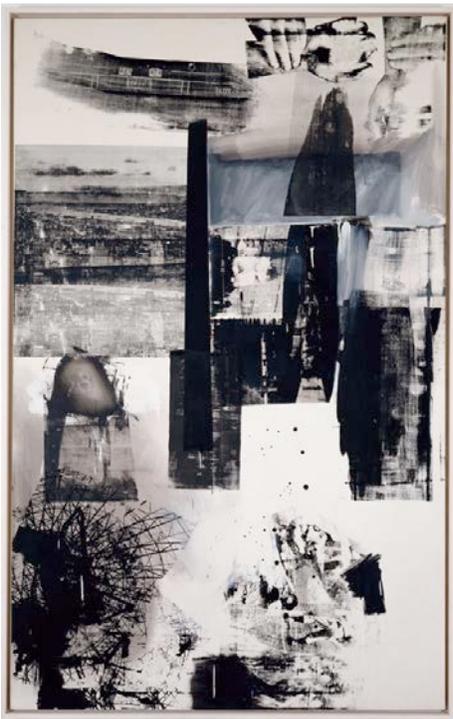
Dwan: I have the catalogue. I don't remember.

Q: This is beautiful. Can you speak a little bit about this show?

Dwan: Yes. Those were works that I had shown and quite a few of them were in my home in Malibu at that point. Frederick [S.] Wight at UCLA came asking if he could do an exhibition in their university gallery and so he had a nice exhibition. It was an irony because I had been a dropout from UCLA, to have my exhibition up there. Well actually when I was interviewing John Cage on the screen, he said, "I was a college dropout." He went to USC [University of

Southern California, Los Angeles], I think at that point. No, maybe Pomona College [Claremont California]. I said, “I was too,” so we had that in common. We both laughed about it. But it was a lovely little exhibition actually.

Q: Here’s the Rauschenberg, *Straw Boss* [1962].



Robert Rauschenberg
Straw Boss, 1962
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas
96 x 60 inches (243.8 x 152.4 cm)
Weatherspoon Art Museum, The
University of North Carolina at
Greensboro
Gift of Virginia Dwan in memory of
Charles and Laura Dwan, 1982

Dwan: That is in North Carolina at Weatherspoon [Art Museum, Greensboro] now and we’re borrowing it back to show in Washington, D.C.

Q: Okay.

Dwan: Yes, that’s a beautiful painting. Those are silkscreens actually.

Q: So in 1965 you moved here. You moved to New York.

Dwan: Yes.

Q: In Los Angeles, you showed Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, Nouveau Realism. In New York your gallery became associated with other forms; with Minimalism, with Conceptual art, later with Earthworks or Land art. Can you speak a little bit about that? Was that just a result of your own tastes changing over the years or do you feel like it was the change of location, the city effect?

Dwan: No. I don't think the city—well, I haven't really thought about that, I have to admit. I don't believe that the city was affecting me. I think that it was my own growth and a certain progression that was taking place and that Minimal art became the art that I was really relating to.

Now it's true that one of the reasons that I related specifically and personally myself to that art was because it was quiet and contemplative and sort of held still, held its ground, and the energy of the work was encompassed in the works. It didn't burst out towards you the way a lot of art did, particularly sculpture. And so in a sense I suppose I was responding to the city. It was more about an actual response within me.

Q: Do you think about the evolution of your own taste from the very beginning until the present?
Do you see it as part of a—

Dwan: I think about it, but it looks like kind of a hodgepodge. Certainly in those later years it was very defined, but the early years were trying out many ways of thinking and seeing.

Q: And so what of the early trying out stuck?

Dwan: Raymond Parker's work was effective in me and the quietness of his sort of balloon-like structures on canvas. Naturally Yves Klein—I say naturally, but to me it's very apparent—and his universalist attitude. Certainly the openness and the readiness of Bob Rauschenberg to respond to so many different things. He was a wonderfully open person and enthusiastic and life was quite magical around him. Of course Philip Guston was an artist whose work I liked very much and he came out and that was wonderful too because he was a very, very smart person to talk to. Franz Kline also. Let me think—who else? Well certainly all of the New Realists were in their own way. Life was very exciting around them. We'd go to stores and buy material for them to work and I enjoyed their presence a lot. Particularly Yves was an important artist. Jean Tinguely said at one point, "Sometimes there are moments where I'd like to just make a big unmoving block," and not much later Tony Smith did make a big unmoving block called *Die* and he was a big influence on a lot of the artists, I alike. *Die* [model 1962, fabricated 1968] could mean to die or a monument for dying, I'm going to die for sure, or it could mean die as in casting something metal, a die-cast, both. Both worked equally well.

Let's see—what other artists. Of course how am I forgetting [Adolph F.] Ad Reinhardt had a show in the first gallery. He had primarily 9-foot paintings and they were wonderful—but I bought one and couldn't hang it in my house because my ceilings weren't quite tall enough and I even thought of cutting into the ceiling or into the floor so that I could enjoy the painting, but it wasn't until I moved to New York that I was able to hang it. But in designing the second gallery in Los Angeles, I said “Well, let's be sure that we are able to handle those 9-foot paintings for another exhibition.” So the ceiling height was to accommodate that and the lighting and marble on the floor in front of the works to make sure that nobody would walk over and put their hands on them and so forth, all really with Ad in mind. We opened the new space and Ad came with his paintings and they were all 5-by-5 feet.

[Laughter]

Dwan: They were all square and none of them were tall, none of them fit that format that I had in mind, but they were wonderful. They were his “ultimate” paintings and ultimately he didn't change from that idea either.

Q: I wanted to ask you about your upcoming show. Your 2016 National Gallery show. How did you choose what you wanted to put together?

Dwan: Actually it was a joint choice between the curator and his over-curator, uber-curator, Harry Cooper. James Meyer is there and he had written a book on Minimalism—*the* book—and had interviewed me about Minimalism for his book so I knew him a bit certainly. They wanted

the collection and a couple of other museums would have liked to have had the collection, but nobody spoke up. So I talked to him and them and it seems that the museum is open seven days a week, and it's free—which as compared to the \$25 or whatever it is now at the Modern—and they don't sell their acquisitions. What is given to them maybe goes into storage, god knows where, but they won't sell in order to acquire other works, which most museums do, and that was a big plus in my mind too.

Q: I just have a couple more questions. I was hoping that you would speak a little bit again about the National Gallery exhibition. I was looking at some of the promotional materials or some of the initial press that followed the announcement of the show. People were saying that one of the themes of the exhibition will be mobility. The mobility that was made possible by commercial aviation at the time you opened your gallery in L.A.

Dwan: I don't see that as being significant at all. At all. Somebody—I forget who—one of the writers brought that up; the fact that I could fly from L.A. to Paris and back and forth. That was something new and therefore I got to know the artists and no.

Q: No?

Dwan: No, it really wasn't that important.

Q: You don't see yourself as having played a role in creating these new relationships between European and American—

Dwan: Oh yes, I do. I do, but not with the mobility—not because I could move around from one place to another. That was of little significance compared to the interaction of the artists from L.A. and from New York and France. I like that idea a lot, but it didn't have to do with my—

Q: Your mobility.

Dwan: —my mobility or the art itself being able to be moved from one place to another. I don't see that.

Q: So you saw it as more of the personal connections that were made between individuals?

Dwan: Yes, art connections.

Q: If you think about that time and those connections that were made, are there specific connections that you remember, specific artists, specific moments that really characterize that period in history?

Dwan: It seems like a small thing in a way, but I did have a party here—I was living in L.A. and I don't remember what the reason was exactly, but I had a party in New York—at the St. Regis Hotel, and Niki and Jean were living in the studio here at the time. I asked Niki if she would help me put it together from this end. At the party I invited the New Realists, everybody that was around, and the Abstract Expressionists—some of whom I still knew—and the Minimal artists.

At that time there wasn't any Land art, that I knew of anyway. So they were all in two little rooms close to each other and they had to get along, at least for that moment. With drinks in their hands, they had to maintain a conversation instead of a fight. Toward the end Leo Castelli came over to me and he said, "I'm so glad that you had this and invited both Bob and Jasper," and I thought, really? Because I was naive. I didn't know anything about Bob and Jasper except that they had been lovers at one time. And he said, "They haven't been talking to each other for the past year." Apparently this broke the ice between them and at least for the time being they were friends again. But that's the only incident I can mention that dramatically sort of shows the East and West and Europe able to be in the same two rooms with each other and get along.

Q: A great little story. Did you see much of Rauschenberg in those New York years?

Dwan: By the time I got to New York, as I was saying, he was with Castelli gallery and it sort of dwindled down. At the beginning I saw a fair amount of him and he was the one who helped me to know John Cage better and Merce Cunningham better. I met Elaine Sturtevant in Bob Rauschenberg's studio and Barbara Rose and Frank Stella. Some of those people were around at that point and there was a sense of a lot of things really happening in art, in the arts actually. It was a very exciting period and one that I would go to with a fresh new anticipation each day, particularly after I opened the gallery here. There was a year that I was here that I wanted to be quiet. My marriage had broken up and I just didn't want to deal with art at that point. I was thinking this morning, the only people I had over once for dinner were [Shusaku] Arakawa and his wife, Madeline Gins, and Merce Cunningham and John Cage. Those four. I was living on Gay Street. I was renting there and had just enough chairs for five of us to manage there. They

were the only people that I wanted to see at the time. It was very important. They were thinking people, they were caring people, and I loved them for it.

But interestingly that didn't include Bob Rauschenberg actually. I wonder why. Maybe Bob was off on his yearlong travels at that point. Do you know what years he went around the world?

Q: That ROCI tour would have been a little bit later, but he did spend a lot of time in Florida starting in '69 and '70.

Dwan: Oh really. Well when he came out to Malibu where I was living—he really liked Malibu—and a year after I had left, he rented a house in Malibu too. Then I think Florida was the other possibility.

Q: Did you ever go down to Captiva [Florida]?

Dwan: Oh yes. I was with [Robert] Bob Smithson and Nancy Holt and we were on our way to the Yucatán [Mexico] and we stopped off in Sanibel [Florida] and I said, “Well, I think Bob Rauschenberg's over there on Captiva.” You know, they're so close. And so we drove up around there and of course I had no way of knowing where he was so I stopped in at a realtor and I said, “He's a really good friend of mine, but I don't know how to find him exactly.” In those days, everything was young and naive so they gave me his address and we drove over there and had a wonderful afternoon with Bob Rauschenberg. The two Bobs got along famously. Just kept up a

wonderful discussion between them and I was madly trying to take notes on a paper bag and Nancy was sitting by listening to all this.

At one point, they saw a date tree—a stump of a date tree—up the beach from Bob Rauschenberg's and they walked up and got it and swam it back down to his property. They were like seals out in the water, out in the ocean, with this log, which they then pulled into shore and planted upside down in the sand. I did photographs of it—one of which somehow found its way to the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York] photography department—and Bob Smithson did terrific drawings too. And so it was wonderful to visit him there and see how he lived. It was quite beautiful. Very simply, he lived very simply, but he kept his art going all the time.



Rauschenberg, Nancy Holt, Virginia Dwan, and unidentified man with Robert Smithson's *Second Upside-Down Tree* (1969), Captiva, Florida, 1969. Photo: Robert Smithson © Holt-Smithson Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York



Virginia Dwan
Second Upside-Down Tree, 1969
Photograph of ephemeral work by
Robert Smithson
Gelatin silver print
7 9/16 x 7 9/16 inches (19.2 x 19.2 cm)

Q: Do you remember what they were talking about that was inspiring you?

Dwan: I wish I did. On that paper bag—I think I finally threw it away or maybe it's somewhere hidden away, but no I don't remember what they were talking about. But they played off of each other, back and forth, in a wonderful way. Both very intelligent people.

Q: Were there any other travels with Bob Rauschenberg?

Dwan: I don't think so, no.

Q: Any other memorable Rauschenberg encounters?

Dwan: Let's see— No, I don't think so—not that I can recall anyway. He and Steve and I sat around that first year at my house and we spent a lot of hours together. We watched TV and drank together [laughs]. I think that's primarily what we did. I found Bob a very open, alive, and caring person. I've heard some people—one artist said to me, "Oh, he's very mean," and I was dumbfounded because he certainly was never at all mean around me. But I guess he could be offhand with some people that were not important to him or whatever. Well yes, I've seen him do things with other people, but not with me anyway. We got along well.

Q: Well maybe to close you could just speak a little bit about what you liked about his work.

Dwan: His work involved things that were at hand in America at that time and particularly in New York. And I found that art that was based on using—certainly I knew about the whole collage, montage, and so forth—but his work was particularly strong in expressing Americanism and the American or New York way of life. I think actually that Americanism was really a big force for a short time there. It changed, I believe, but I even did a show called *My Country 'Tis of Thee* [1962], which involved quite a few of the Pop art people and some other works as well because there was a sense of—against the old way and “Let’s start with the new” and certainly Bob personified that. He also had an unerring sense of proportion and shape. He knew how to put objects together in a way that was always wonderful and even with objects that were not wonderful in themselves at all. I felt exhilarated by his work.



Robert Rauschenberg
Coexistence, 1961
Combine: oil on canvas with fabric, wood,
metal, and wire
66 3/4 x 49 7/8 x 14 1/4 inches (169.5 x
126.7 x 36.2 cm)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Gift of the Sydney and Frances Lewis
Foundation
Exhibited in *My Country 'Tis of Thee*,
Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1962

Q: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]