

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

Adelle (Bonny) Lutz is an artist, designer, and actor. Robert Rauschenberg met Lutz when he was working at Gemini G.E.L. print workshop in Los Angeles. She was married to musician David Byrne, who commissioned Rauschenberg to design a limited edition album cover for the Talking Heads album *Speaking in Tongues* (1983). Lutz and Byrne were regular visitors of Rauschenberg's New York and Captiva, Fla. studios.

Transcription of phone interview with Adelle Lutz conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on November 2, 2020. Reviewed and edited by the speakers December 8, 2020.

Adelle Lutz [AL]: You are speaking with Adelle Lutz, family nickname, Bonny, which was the name that [Robert] Bob [Rauschenberg] and everyone around him also knew me as.

David White [DW]: Including me.

AL: Yes, a big including you. I've tried to always work under my given name and encouraged people to call me Adelle, but "Bonny" is "family." It keeps coming back and it's comfortable.

DW: So as long as you're comfortable with it. That's the part that matters to me.

AL: Please introduce me as Adelle, which can be confusing but screw this—if Lauren Bacall can be "Betty" to her family why can't I have two names? Hmmm?

What can I say? When I met Bob—

DW: Which was when? Do you recall what year?

AL: Around 1973 or '74 when I moved to Los Angeles from Tokyo. Oh my goodness, that is when I met Bob, he was working at Gemini G.E.L. My sister, Tina [Chow], and her husband, Michael [Chow], had opened a restaurant called Mr. Chow and I ran the front. Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, and [Sidney B.] Sid Felsen would come in and they'd bring in the artists that would be working with them, making editions. And honestly, I don't know why I was the fortunate one that was invited to go watch Bob work. I would get off work around 1:00 or 1:30 in the morning, go over to Gemini and I'd just watch Bob. I'd just be the fly on the wall; night after night.

DW: Oh what fun.

AL: And then it became year after year, whenever Bob was in L.A. So that's how we met. I was not an artist. I really didn't know that much about art at all. I had studied a bit of archeology and far Eastern religions in Japan, which included sculptures and temples and Japanese, Chinese, and Korean things. But I was a real newbie when it came to looking at what he was doing. Of course I was familiar with his name. I wasn't an idiot, but still we had a long friendship and—

DW: That sounds like the ideal way to have met him, at work. That's just fantastic.

AL: Yes. And I remember at that time seeing . . . Well, he was doing the *Hoarfrost Edition* series (1974) and there was one that I particularly liked. I had a car, a \$200 clunker that had the hood tied on. If I would hit a big bump, then boing, it would fly open. And I saw Bob print this piece, *Scent* [Rauschenberg, *Scent (Hoarfrost Edition)*, 1974], and I thought, "Okay, I can buy a car or I can maybe buy this . . ." After Bob had already left, I talked to Sidney B. and he kindly worked out a plan. And I got *Scent* instead of the car.



Robert Rauschenberg
Scent (Hoarfrost Edition), 1974
Offset lithograph transferred to a collage of paper bags and fabric
86 x 50 inches (218.4 x 127 cm)
From an edition of 30, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
RRF 74.E035

DW: Ah. Perfect. Perfect.

AL: I'm still the proud owner. When Bob would come . . . I remember one time Rick Begneaud [Rauschenberg's nephew] was coming into town and I think Rick might've been sixteen; a teenager. I was probably one of the younger people that Bob knew in L.A., so I became Rick's, not a babysitter, and not a driver, but his guide for all things L.A. That was fun, too . . . It was always a delight and a surprise.

I was just thinking how if I made a timeline—that was the seventies, in the early eighties, '82—I met a person who was a musician and he became my boyfriend. We later married. That was David Byrne. Of course, he and Bob got along really well. Then, in 1983 I think it was, Bob did the Talking Heads amazing limited edition of *Speaking in Tongues* album—but not just the cover but a whole process of making a special pressing of the transparent image printed record that would float around in a sort of transparent vacu-cover with the design ever moving [Rauschenberg, *Cover for Talking Heads album Speaking in Tongues - Limited Edition*, 1983].



Rauschenberg with David Byrne and Bonnie Lutz at Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles, California, ca. 1985. Photo: Unattributed. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.



Robert Rauschenberg
Cover for Talking Heads album Speaking in Tongues - Limited Edition, 1983
Offset lithograph on vacuum formed plastic
(Deluxe edition label is silkscreened directly on record vinyl.)
13 x 13 inches (33 x 33 cm)
RRF 83.E005

Then at the end of that decade, in 1989, when our Malu [Byrne] was born, Bob asked to be our child's godfather, which really threw me for a loop as it was so unexpected. Yes! We were so touched and honored. Then he went and sent a great work on fabric that featured a mother and child at the top [*Wimple (Hoarfrost)*, 1974; RRF 74.070].

And being Bob, he just went on and on. In the nineties—in '92, when my sister was dying of AIDS, Bob said, "Should we send her something? Would that make Tina feel good?" My eyes must have widened and he sent her a beautiful piece that her children have now. But you know his generosity was beyond friends. I think even more than I can speak about Bob as an artist, because I'm not an art historian or, I am now myself an artist, but his ability to just open up and not be precious about it, just do it, give it away, collaborate. The first Earth Day buses! [In 1991, Rauschenberg designed three bus billboards to draw attention to environmental issues: *Last Turn—Your Turn*, *Ozone*, and *Pledge*.] It was as if being around him the top of my head would be removed and suddenly there was 360 limitless vision. He was my personal Buddha.

DW: Oh what a nice way to put it. Those things that you're saying.

AL: What?

DW: You're saying those things that people almost invariably remark on, his generosity and openness, this is terrific to hear once again.

AL: Oh yes. You know, I don't have any stories that are truly any different from anyone else's. That one would just go, "Wow, that's a great story." But I was thinking about the other day when you had contacted me, and I thought, "Oh my, what am I going to say . . . ?" I was talking to Kiki Smith and she had asked me before to do a guest artist talk as she teaches a class with Valerie Hammond, on print. And I thought, "Well I can't speak to your class. I know nothing about print." And then I started laughing and I thought, "What am I thinking? I watched Bob print night after night. For years . . . And I might not be able to talk about how to do those transfers or how to ink a silk screen, but the act of creating and what it takes or what it doesn't take to find beauty and truth in smaller things, the discards—this world . . ." I thought about how I was their age when Bob and I first became friends. And it was suddenly so important, even crucial, to talk to those students. So I ended up doing that and—

DW: Well good, good.

AL: Yeah, it was. It was very sweet because just remembering how Bob always had a bit of Captiva [Florida] in his pocket, if he wasn't there and, and to be able to tell those kids when he didn't have money, and maybe after that too, how he would go around the block and see what caught his eye or what he could pick up and drag back.

DW: Yeah. I think that was true, particularly in New York. I remember him talking about that, setting a goal or a limitation, finding his materials. One block or two blocks or something like that.

AL: Right. Exactly. There is one thing though, which ever since you contacted me, I've been thinking about. When I think about this, I always go, "Oh, better not say it." And then if I don't say it, I'll be thinking, "Well, it was big truth that I didn't say." And that if I did say it, I'd go, "Oh, oh, oh, why'd you say?"

DW: Now you've got to say it.

AL: Yeah. I know, now I'm stuck. Early on, I remember Bob telling me about his father and what his father's dying words to him were. Do you know this story?

DW: I can't say that I—I couldn't tell you that I do.

AL: His father, when he was dying, Bob said that he was there hour after hour, next to his bed. And it sounded like it was more than one day. It was for a while. His father never talked to him except for his last words to Bob, which were, "Milton, I never did like you."

DW: Ooh.

AL: I know.

DW: Ouch.

AL: Yeah, more than. In thinking on that, I thought, "So much of Bob's pain, that's got to be so painful," and his personal struggles became his humanity and his ability and his great need to connect through ROCI [Rauschenberg Oversea Culture Interchange, 1984–91] with people who were disadvantaged or ignored, or Change [Change, Inc.], helping other people who might be artists struggling in any way. I think it came out of, I'm sure, his pain that he just flipped over on its head.

DW: I don't know if you're familiar with a work from the *Spread* series (1975–83), it's called *Whistle Stop* [Rauschenberg, *Whistle Stop (Spread)*, 1977]. And it's kind of an homage to his father in some way. The fact that he would do such a thing from a comment like that; but it would be one way to deal with it . . . is to overcome it with that.



Robert Rauschenberg

Whistle Stop (Spread), 1977

Solvent transfer, fabric and paper on wood panels with objects and train signal light

84 x 180 x 9 inches (213.4 x 457.2 x 22.9 cm)

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; Museum purchase and commission, The Benjamin J. Tiller Memorial Trust

RRF 77.002

AL: Right.

DW: Your generosity, experience.

AL: Yeah. And who knows, maybe . . . We all have things that we have to deal with. We're all old enough to have a past, as they say. Maybe, I don't know, maybe he just got to a place in his own life where he understood why his father was in so much pain himself. It can be generational. So, yeah.

DW: It's wonderful that he did have such a close relationship with his mother. So it wasn't like he was an abandoned child. I mean, even if his father was not proud of him, because he didn't want to go hunting with him when his father got out a gun and went out in the woods.

AL: Right? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh man, I'm going to get in trouble for these. Should I shut up?

DW: Not at all because there's a transcription to which you can add things that you wish you had said or delete things you wish you didn't say. So I think it's better just keep talking as you are as freely and generously and know that you're not going to get in trouble if you don't want to.

AL: Okay. Because Bob told me a story about when a hurricane or a storm was coming through and he was already Robert Rauschenberg. This wasn't a childhood story or anything. He said that he had called his mom to make sure that she had plywood to put up over the windows. And she said that she had used his work to board up the windows. And then he said, "You did what?" And then she said, "Oh, don't worry. I turned them backside out, so the neighbors wouldn't see." Can that be true?

DW: Actually I've heard that story before, it must be true. And certainly, he must have told that to other people as well.

AL: Okay. Yeah, yeah. No, it's not the kind of thing I just want to blurt out. But truly if it's his archives and . . . I don't know, you will have to think on that.

DW: She did board up the windows with a few. . . he had done some paintings on plywood. My understanding is, they were very large voluptuous, female figures. This is the plywood. And they were nudes, but she had painted bras and panties. [See *The Reminiscences of Janet Begneaud*, 2015. Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project. Conducted in collaboration with INCITE/Columbia Center for Oral History Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives. <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist/oral-history/janet-begneaud>.] I mean she had—



Dora Rauschenberg with her “storm shutters” made from Rauschenberg’s early paintings, Lafayette, Louisiana, ca. August 1992. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Philip Gould.

AL: Oh, how hilarious.

DW: She was concerned if the neighbors ever saw them.

AL: That’s great. That’s great. Oh, I love it.

DW: Now tell me, in the eighties, did you then go down and see Bob in Captiva sometime?

AL: Yeah. I went a couple of times. Oh goodness. The first time I think it was after . . . I’m going to say it was early nineties because our daughter was with us. And I remember that Lawrence [Voytek], in the studio, also had a daughter about the same age so Malu would play with his daughter and we stayed in the Fish House and because—

DW: Which Bob thought of as a practically a sacred place and not very many people got to go there, or certainly stay there.

AL: Oh, really?

DW: That shows his affection for you. Really, I’m serious.

AL: Ah. Well, it was a treasured time. I remember these odd images, it’s not one story, but just sort of images of Sachika [Hisachika Takahashi] trying to spear a fish. Well, he would do that. He’d stand there very silently with a spear in the water and then, “Got him.” Bob was working on the metal pieces then. And I remember how—

DW: They started from maybe the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties. You’re right about the period.

AL: Right in there. Uh-huh (affirmative). I remember the first time seeing his space. Not the studio workspace, I’m talking about where he . . . his kitchen, his floor, everything. Now people

live a bit more, maybe closer to how he did, but I'd never seen anywhere that was so white and so clean and had just one chair over in a corner. I remember it as the "moon" chair by Shiro Kuramata, whom I had known in Japan. It was a metal mesh chair that if you sat in it, your buttons would get hooked in it. Impossible to be comfortable in. So hard. A sculptural idea of a chair, really. Do you know that one? Bob's place was almost like a science lab to my mind, because it was just so clean, one counter with nothing on it, one da-da-da. The other things that I think of was that wherever he was, the TV was on, on, on. Not always with sound, but images constantly flowing. I know he sat down to eat, but I always picture him standing up and in movement. I don't picture him as sitting down and chatting.

DW: Yeah. That's an astute observation. He really was on the move most of the time. It seems to me too.

AL: Mm. Yeah. Yeah. Oh, goodness, that trip. When we were down there, all three of us, I was there with my husband, David and our daughter, Malu, and when we were in the studio and he had everything up on the walls, he said, "So which one do you like?" And David pointed to one. And he said, "So that's yours" [Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, 1991; RRF 91.085]. I think I probably kind of gasped. Then he looked at me and he said, "And is that your favorite Bonny?" And I pointed at a small piece that was portrait of Laika, his doggy. And he said, "Well, then you should have that one too." And I said, "I can't, I can't." And, and I've been thinking about that piece ever since—that I turned it down because he was so generous in offering up the one. But then cut to some months later, he found David's tennis shoes under the bed, in the boat house and he sent back the shoes with an encaustic piece of the shoes [Rauschenberg, *David's Shoes (Shales)*, 1994]. The beat goes on. He just . . .



Robert Rauschenberg
David's Shoes (Shales), 1994
Fire wax and transfer on canvas mounted on board with
painted aluminum frame
39 1/4 x 28 x 1 1/2 inches (99.7 x 71.1 x 3.8 cm)
RRF 94.077

DW: Those are very nice stories.

AL: Oh, thank you.

DW: There's really so much to explain about Bob.

AL: Yeah. Well, I always pictured him kind of, that smile and that laugh, which are unforgettable. It's like when you see a retriever that's just ready to jump for that Frisbee—it's just pure joy.

And again, going back to him being my personal Buddha, he was absolutely present. He was absolutely now, in the moment—

DW: Yes, indeed.

AL: Like no one else I have ever been around.

DW: Yeah. I found there was never any, what you'd call, small talk. It could be very personal, but he was on the ball. Fantastically interesting to have a conversation or listen to him, as you say.

AL: Mm. Mm-hmm (affermative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Yeah.

DW: Bonny, this is absolutely wonderful. So I thank you very much for your recollections.

AL: Thank you for including me.

DW: Oh, listen. You are fun. It makes perfect sense. I'm really happy that you agreed to take part in this. And so we'll get this transcribed and off to you sooner, rather than later. For sure.

AL: As time allows. Yes. Yes. Okay.

DW: Keep warm in that big barn. Very nice to speak with you. And we'll be speaking soon again. I'm sure.

AL: Great. Okay. Lots of love David.

DW: And to you too, Bonny. Bye.

Addition from Adelle Lutz via email, December 8, 2020:

After we spoke, I woke up in the middle of the night and felt as though I didn't really say exactly what I had to express about Bob—that all of my recollections it didn't have to do with his giving me or us this that or the other—it had to do with his ultimate generosity. I had witnessed a number of times Bob's deep and even psychic pain. Yet despite that, there was his generosity to so many over and over across the board. And Bob wasn't just generous, he was Considerate

which is quite different. He gave in all directions without thought as to himself, unfettered by consequences. He was a creature of movement and flow. What poured out of Bob were dynamic gestures of attention, love and benefit for the other. Connections. And this is what really needs addressing. Such bravery. He was a king.

I will always thank him.

xxxB