

Interview of **EDWARD MCBRIDE**:
Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer
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Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates. RRFA 08.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

KAREN THOMAS: Today is Wednesday, May 4th, and I'm speaking to Edward MCBRIDE: about Venice and Bob Rauschenberg.

Tell me how you first came to the State Department.

EDWARD MCBRIDE: I was a graduate student in Washington, at Georgetown, and I was trying to get a degree to pursue a degree in public service that had an international dimension. So I was in the School of Foreign Service. And in order to stay for the second year of this -- I'd saved enough money for one year, basically-- I had to get a job. I was offered a job as a summer intern in an office in an organization called the United States Information Agency. As it turned out -- the office that I was hired to work in was called the Exhibits Division, and its mission was to provide, primarily, these large exhibitions that went to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to fulfill agreements under bi-lateral cultural agreements -- which was the only way in those days, we could do anything in Russia, then the Soviet Union, and in Eastern Europe.

The office that I was assigned to was called the Fine Arts Division, a part of the Exhibits operation; but, as the name suggests, our mission dealt exclusively with providing fine-arts components, or free-standing exhibitions, as the case that happened, to carry out cultural exchange agreements that we had with other countries. That's how I came to work for the government.

In the course of that year, in the course of that assignment -- which lasted roughly three months, June, July, and August -- I really enjoyed working there, and I learned a great deal about American art, in particular, about which I knew very little, to be honest with you. I enjoyed the work. I had two very wonderful colleagues -- a woman named Lois Bingham, who ran the office, and her assistant, a woman named Eva Tobey-Marcellin [phonetic], who sort of taught me the ropes, basically. I was the third person in this office. By the end of the summer, I was trying to figure out a way that I could parlay this into a job, and continue to go to Georgetown -- which I wanted to do, because I wanted the degree --, and I was not sure what the best way was to go about this. But at one point, sort of towards the end of August, Lois Bingham, my boss, came to me, and said, "Is there any way we could persuade you to stay on? We would be happy to work out some arrangement, so you could work around your class schedule. We would be pleased if you could figure out how you could do this." I thought to myself -- trying to be cool -- here I am, in this really terrific job; it's being dumped in my lap; it is, in fact, why I am trying to pursue this degree -- because it gives me a job in public service that does international work, and so on,

and I thought to myself, "Be careful. Play this carefully, so you don't blow it." I said, "Well, that's a very interesting idea. Make me an offer." She said, "Fine," and subsequently came back and, indeed, made me an offer. She said I could be hired as a GS-whatever it was -- I don't even remember now. But whatever it was, was appropriate to my station in life and experience, and it enabled me, then, to carry on with my classes -- which I did. And I then took this job.

So my move into the government was kind of sideways, from a summer intern position, which, ultimately, I parlayed into a full-time job. That's a long way to answer your question, but that's how I got started, basically.

THOMAS: So this was what --?

MCBRIDE:: This was in 1963, I guess.

THOMAS: So wheels are beginning to turn about --

MCBRIDE: Venice was very much on the agenda at this point, because not too many -- maybe even a year -- in the early '60s, at any rate, the government decided -- or, the USIA part of it, the Exhibits Division --decided that it was time that we, the U.S. government, took on the responsibility for these two big, important biennials, the one in Venice, and the one in Sao Paolo, in Brazil. We were under some pressure from MoMA, which wanted to get out from under all of this, because it was a burden that they didn't think the museum could continue to bear. And, anyway, Walter Rasmussen, who ran that program for MoMA for many years, decided that it was time that the government be out front on this issue; that the government had a responsibility to promote American culture and art achievement, just as it was carrying out other diplomatic initiatives overseas.

That resonated with the folks in this office. The man who ran the Exhibits Division, a wonderful artist by the name of Robert Sevard, was sympathetic to the idea, and persuaded the powers [that be] that we should give it a try, at least. That's how the Biennale auspices came to this particular office at USIA, where I was working.

THOMAS: From the private sector.

MCBRIDE: From the private sector, essentially. Well, from MoMA.

So MoMA was delighted that they could get rid of this. I don't remember the details exactly, but with some legal document, I believe the pavilion at the Giardini in Venice, where the Biennale took place -- which was owned by MoMA -- was either leased for a dollar a year, or some arrangement was made, so we could use that facility for the exhibition.

So the Biennale was very much on the agenda of the office when I arrived. The mechanics of how all this was going to take place had not yet fallen into place, but he discussions were underway. Ultimately, one of my first assignments in that office was to work on this project for Venice. I remember Alan Solomon, who was ultimately named the commissioner for the exhibition, came down from the Jewish Museum, of which he was the director, at that time, in

New York, and talked to us about some ideas that he had. We listened, and ultimately the office officially invited him to become the commissioner, and he accepted the invitation. We, the U.S. Government Office of Fine Arts, in the Exhibits Division of USIA, agreed to provide the funding and the back-stop support for making all of this happen.

Since I was the third person in this office -- we were all very deeply and intimately involved in it, because it was the biggest project we were working on at the time, and it was such a big project that we all were engaged in one way or another.

So once the decision to offer the commission, the role of commissioner, to Alan Solomon, had taken place and he had accepted, we then got down to the nitty-gritty of putting an exhibition together. I believe he came up with several ideas, but, essentially, the project that emerged was the school, the Pop Art school if you will, or whatever you want to call it -- but that was the hot movement of the day. He had already exhibited a couple of the artists at the Jewish Museum, and had a pretty clear idea of what he thought should constitute the exhibition that would go to Venice. This included Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Morris Louis, Claes Oldenburg, and I can't remember --

THOMAS: Ken Noland.

MCBRIDE: Noland, yes.

THOMAS: And John Chamberlain.

MCBRIDE: And John Chamberlain. That's right.

THOMAS: Can I just ask you -- was it almost a foregone conclusion that the focus would be this next generation of American artists, rather than Abstract Expressionists, or -- ?

MCBRIDE: No. On the contrary. There was quite a lengthy and spirited debate, not only within the art world, about how this ought to happen, but from other people who had strong feelings and ideas, and who were prominent members of this community, who spoke out. And, certainly, the case for Abstract Expressionism was a very, very strong one. I don't remember now who the principal players were, but I do remember that Clement Greenberg had a very strong opinion about this, which he aired, and which was published in several -- the *New York Times* had a great deal to say about it, and the other, art publications, as well.

But, ultimately, there was considerable discussion about what the focus of the show ought to be, and in the end, Alan Solomon's view was selected. His stable of artists, that we've just named, became the show. Then the process of selecting the works from among them was basically quite lengthy, and sometimes quite tedious, as well. Because Solomon had a pretty good idea of what he wanted, and he knew the work of all these artists very well. Some of it was going to be fairly straightforward to get from public collections; others were going to be extremely difficult because many of these pieces were still in private collections. On the other hand, some of the artists were not quite so well known at the time, and it was a big boost for them, and for the owners of these particular pieces, that this particular honor should fall on these particular artists

at that time. So I think it certainly enhanced the value, in many cases, of the works and the artists who were selected for the Biennale.

But there were big players from the very beginning. One of the biggest was certainly Leo Castelli, who was the dealer for at least a couple of the artists. There was Andre Emmerich, who was a very big player, as well, and there were several private collections that were quite important, the names of which, I'm sorry, I've forgotten now. But, in the end, we had a lot of discussions and a lot of meetings with all the lenders involved in this.

THOMAS: It would be interesting -- if you wake up in the middle of the night, scribble down some names. That would be great.

MCBRIDE: I will. I'll call you. I'm just trying -- if I could put my hands -- I've got a copy of this catalogue somewhere -- it would all come back much more easily, if I could look at the catalogue, but I just didn't have time to find it.

At any rate, the decision to go with Alan Solomon's proposal was, by this time, locked in place. Then the details began about how big the exhibition was going to be; how we were going to get the particular works that he felt were essential to it. He, by this time, had pretty much the support of all of the artists. He had actually been in touch with many of the artists, and at one point, when he ultimately selected a deputy commissioner, in the person of a local art dealer here -- Alice Denney -- who was very strong on Ken Noland, at the time -- and, indeed, the others, as well -- but since Noland was a Washington artist, and she had kind of -- I don't want to say "launched his career," particularly, but she certainly had given him a couple of very prominent, early shows -- and Morris Louis, too, because the two of them were artists that Alice had a particular interest in. She had an interest in all of them.

Editor Note:
Alice Denney
was a curator
and arts
administrator.

But, at any rate, by this time Alice had become a part of the operation, having been selected by Alan Solomon to be the deputy for this project. So it was easier, in a way, for us, because Alice was living in Washington. Well, it wasn't difficult; New York was not that far away. At least we could work a great deal more quickly and efficiently, having a second person here.

So at any rate, the show went together, and it began to fall into place. I don't remember anything of any significance that you probably don't know about, at any rate, about putting the show together. But one of the things that ultimately got me more deeply involved in it was when it was finally packed and ready to go, we discovered, to our chagrin, that most of the pictures were so outsized that there wasn't a cargo plane around that was big enough to put them in. So we then began to pursue the military, in the hope that we could persuade the U.S. Air Force to let us use one of their large planes, to put these outsized crates on. We're talking about crates that were, by current days, not that big, but in those days, when you had conventional aircraft and so on, it would be very difficult. You would have had to have taken all the canvases rolled up, and framed them when you got to Venice -- which was not a good idea, from almost any point of view.

So at any rate, we did, indeed -- and I got more involved in this than a lot of other people -- we had a lot of negotiations with the Air Force and the Pentagon, and finally we got the concurrence

that they would allow us to use a military aircraft to transport these pictures. Then my assignment, essentially, became that of the courier of these pictures. So when we had them all packed by a wonderful firm called the Santini Brothers, in New York, who were very big in the fine arts packing business --and they did a wonderful job. I went up several times to see how it was all going. These enormous cases emerged, and my job was to get them down from the warehouse of the Santini Brothers in Manhattan, to Dover Air Force Base -- not Dover. Sorry. McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey -- where they would be flown to Aviano, the U.S. Air Force Base just outside of Venice.

So the great day dawns, we go up, and I was up at the crack of dawn, to get up to supervise the loading of these pictures.

THOMAS: How many pictures are we talking about?

MCBRIDE: I think there were something like 100+ paintings, but several of them were so big -- they were like twenty-two feet long by ten feet high, and stuff like that. Some of them had individual cases, and the cases were quite enormous. I was warned by everybody involved in this that my life was at stake here if anything went wrong; and that if I was on the tarmac when they were loading these planes, and I saw anything, I had to run over and prop them up with my own hands, to be sure that nothing happened.

So we get to the base, they have this guy on the plane called the loadmeister, who determines how things get loaded on airplanes. We had given them all the specifications about the number of cases, the dimensions, the square footage and everything -- and he calculated -- and admitted, over a few drinks, later, when we got to know each other a little bit later -- that he had made not a miscalculation, but that he had not gone about this in quite the right way. He was absolutely right in terms of the square footage that we needed -- because he had done his numbers quite carefully -- but that's if you're packing ping-pong balls, and they'll all sit on top of one another quite nicely. But there's a lot of wasted space if you're packing crates that are twenty-two inches long by maybe eighteen inches wide. So we had a hell of a time actually packing all this stuff on the airplane. We finally got it, but we were delayed by almost twenty-four hours, and I spent one very disagreeable night at this Air Force base, waiting for them to sort it all out.

Then the great day dawns, we take off, and it's a propeller-driven airplane, of course, because this is 1964 that we're talking about. Jets were in service, but not the way they are today. So this C-130, I think it was, was the aircraft -- it had those great big doors that opened in the front, and you could almost drive trucks through it -- which was handy, because that made it fairly easy to load these outsized crates.

Anyway, Alan Solomon had come down from New York, and Alice had come up from Washington, to supervise all of this. The door slams, I wave goodbye and hop on the airplane, we fly away into the purple sunset, and off we go to Aviano. We got to Aviano, having stopped twice, because they didn't have the capacity to fly quite as long, and we stopped somewhere up in Newfoundland, I guess -- Gander -- and then we stopped in the Azores, to refuel, and ultimately, then, went on to Aviano, where we arrived on, I guess, the second day, at about 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning. By this time, Alice and Alan had made their way to Venice

on a commercial flight or something, but they were there to meet the plane when we arrived. We took everything off, put it on trucks which were there, and got it down to the point in Venice where it had to be put on barges, to get to the two destinations that were going to be the sites for the exhibition. One was going to be the pavilion in the Giardini -- the garden where the rest of the Biennale took place -- and because of the outsized canvases involved here, we had persuaded the Biennale authorities to allow us to have an extension of the site of the Biennale in the American Consulate in Venice -- which had recently closed, but the government still owned the building. It was wide open, empty space, and perfect for what we needed.

So half of the pictures were going to be in the Giardini -- not half of them, but the more conventional sizes-- and the larger paintings -- the Rauschenberg, the Morris Louis, and the Ken Noland -- were primarily in the Consulate. The other things that were in the Consulate, that I remember now, as I speak -- because there was a little garden in the Consulate, an interior courtyard which was quite lovely -- and we put one or two of the Chamberlain sculptures out there, which looked very nice, these odd, sort of automobile parts all pasted together, in this elegant palazzo on the Grand Canal. It was quite stunning -- as were, of course, the other pictures hanging on these clean, white walls in the Consulate building.

In addition to the space in the Consulate for the exhibition, we had a little office there from which the administrative work connected with the exhibition was handled, and we had hired, by this time, a local Venetian woman whose name was Marietta Guetta Stern. She was the aunt of a friend from Washington, who had told us about this relative in Venice, and she was very well connected in the art world in Venice; and had, in fact, worked for MoMA, managing the pavilion for several years before we took her on to work for the new kids on the block -- in this case, the American government.

She was quite helpful, and was, as a Venetian, essential, because she knew how to get the people for the barges; how to get the movers; how to get the people to wear gloves, to handle the pictures, and so on. So she was really quite important to all this, and she also had arranged for those of us who were staying there -- we used the second-floor living quarters of the Consulate for our accommodation while we were there. So at any given time, there were perhaps half a dozen people living upstairs, over the store, so to speak, because it was rent-free, in essence, since the government owned the building, and all we did, with Marietta's help, was to hire some furniture, which we just put up there so we had beds, and tables, and chairs, and things like that. Marietta also found for us a cook who would come in, clean up, and cook meals for us and everything, which was quite helpful.

So, much of the work of installing the exhibition focused on the Consulate, as much as it did on the pavilion, in the actual garden. The authorities had agreed that we would be able to set up a little booth outside the Consulate, and that people who had tickets for the Giardini would also be allowed to enter the Consulate, to see what was, by extension, a part of the Biennale; but, in this case, housed in the former American Consulate.

Let's see -- when we were doing all this we decided to let the public know (a) where the Consulate was -- although many people did, because it's right on the Grand Canal -- we needed some sort of advertisement to inform the people who were coming where the building was, so we

commissioned a large sign, a banner I guess it was called, with the names of all the artists, and the official sign of the Biennale. I don't know -- there was some symbol that was used for the Biennale. We had on it all the names of the artists who were included in the exhibition, the American exhibition, and the wonderful thing about it that I remember -- and, actually, when the exhibition was over I folded up this banner and brought it home, I thought it was so interesting.

The banner had everything right except the spelling of "Jasper Johns" on the banner. Jasper's last name became Jones, under the banner, which we all had a big chuckle about. But since all this happened in such swift time, there was no way we could take it down and get it corrected. So I think someone took a magic marker, or a piece of chalk, or something, to try to make Johns out of Jones, basically. But that remains a souvenir, and it's somewhere around here. If I can put my thinking-cap on, I'll find out where it is, and you might like to see a picture of it. I brought it back, and kept it in my basement for many, many years.

At any rate, the pavilion was set up for the Biennale, and when the opening occurred, it was announced, in all the publicity, that part of the American exhibition would be visible in the American Consulate, on the Grand Canal, and that all were encouraged to come there, to see the part of the show that could not be contained in the small, sort of Monticello-type pavilion -- because there was simply so space.

That took a lot of politicking; and, as you can imagine, it was not easy, because the authorities were obviously very reluctant to split up the site. It had never happened before, and there was basic resistance on the part of the Italian authorities, to do this. So there were many, many people who gently tried to apply -- pressure is perhaps too strong a word -- but many conversations took place to try to persuade the Italian authorities that we should be able to officially designate the Consulate as an extension of the Biennale.

Ultimately, a compromise was struck.

THOMAS: Because the pictures that were in the pavilion were the pictures on which the decision would be based. Is that the reason?

MCBRIDE: Well, that turned out to be the case. Of course, it wasn't known at the time, because the jury was not sharing -- they weren't telling anybody what they were thinking, but, obviously, word gets out, and well-connected people, particularly the likes of Castelli and Emmerich, people you could get a little inside information from --

As it turned out, as the jury was deliberating, word got out that the Americans were very strong, indeed, and that there was huge interest, particularly, in these oversized canvases -- none of which were actually displayed at the pavilion, because there was simply not enough room to do that.

So the story goes -- and I'm a little woolly on this, and I'm the first to admit it. I've got the general thrust of it right, but the details I may stumble on a little bit, here --, but what happened, essentially, was that after several meetings with the Biennale authorities, a decision was reached that yes, they would consider, for the prize, the artists whose works were represented in the pavilion -- and the focus, by this time, was pretty much on Rauschenberg, although there was

still discussion, I think, generated a lot by Andre Emmerich -- who, I believe, represented Noland, if I'm not mistaken. He represented one of the artists. At any rate, the idea was that if there was some way that one canvas by, in this case, Rauschenberg -- who, I gather, by this time, had emerged as the favorite -- if one canvas could actually be exhibited in the pavilion, in the Giardini, that that would, then, enable the jury and the Italian authorities to declare this person the winner of the first prize, this year, because there was *one* of those paintings in the actual pavilion, on the grounds of the Giardini.

I think that, probably, negotiating massively behind the scenes -- and we'll never know now, because he's, sadly, dead and gone --, but I believe that Leo Castelli was a big player in convincing the Italian authorities that Rauschenberg, should he be declared the winner -- that we could find some way to get one of his paintings to the pavilion.

So at one point, when all these discussions were going on -- and I don't remember when it was -- a group of us were at the Consulate, it was in the evening, at some point, and Castelli had obviously had these conversations, and said that what we had to do was to figure out some way to get one of Bob Rauschenberg's canvases to the Giardini. There was no easy option, because these were all very, very big paintings. Again, if I had the catalogue, I could tell you which one went. I've forgotten now. But, at any rate, what we decided, with the help of this wonderful Marietta Stern Guetta [sic], once again -- she found a little man who had a barge, and said, "If we can get this painting out of the Consulate, onto this barge, in the dead of night, when nobody is aware of what's going on here, because they'll -- there's many a slip twixt cup and lip, as they say -- but let's see what we can do here."

So we got one of the pictures all wrapped up in an old sheet or something like that, put it on this barge that was moored at the front of the Consulate, tied to one of those barber-pole things, I remember it -- and there was this rickety little landing, that we never even used the front of it, because it was considered unsafe [laughter] -- the step-way in from the dock of the little whatever-it-was, was rotting or something like that -- so everybody was terrified that some dire accident would occur, and that the painting could well fall into the lagoon.

So everybody was antsy, and on pins and needles about this. I think a lot of people had had a great deal to drink, if I'm not mistaken -- because it was at the end of an evening, and everybody was rowdy, and being good-humored about it -- but there was a lot of noise, and to-ing and fro-ing, and finally the painting gets into the barge, under the cloak of darkness, and then cloaked, again, with something to protect it. It disappears into the vapors of the night, [laughs] and heads to the Giardini. By this time -- I don't remember how this worked -- but we had to remove a wall, or build an extra wall -- there was some construction involved, in order to have a place to hang this painting, when we actually got it to the Giardini.

Somehow, all of this happened. I don't remember. But, obviously, Alan Solomon, and Castelli, and people were aware of what needed to be done, and it was done. By magic, the next morning, there was, on the wall, a picture by Robert Rauschenberg, in the pavilion. At some point, later -- I don't remember if it was the same day, but in the next few days, the jury then announced that Bob Rauschenberg had won the first prize -- and everybody said this with a straight face,

because he was, indeed, represented in the pavilion. The story was, then, that that made everybody happy, and the rest is history, as they say.

But it was an interesting story, in the way that the picture got there. It certainly caused a lot of angst and grief among most of the people who were involved in it.

THOMAS: Was Bob present for the transfer?

MCBRIDE: I think he was, but my memory is not clear on this. If you have a chance, call up Alice Denney and ask her. She'll certainly remember this. But I think he was. I'm almost certain that Ken Noland was there. But I can't remember any of the particulars about the rest of it. But this transfer was finally effected, the sun comes up the next day, and there is a canvas of Rauschenberg in the pavilion, and the announcement is made that he is awarded the first prize, and it was all great.

Soon after that, the crowds began to come, and the pavilion was inundated with visitors. It was great for everybody. It was a huge success, and there was a huge controversy as well, because a lot of the art world was not prepared to accept the fact that this seminal movement -- as it's turned out, in American painting -- was basically the reason for awarding this prize. So there was a lot of controversy, particularly in the European press. I think the French were not particularly enamored of all of this, simply because they figured that this represented the final shift, if ever there was a question, that the center of gravity of the art world moved from Europe to America, particularly from Paris to New York, essentially.

So there was not universal rejoicing when all this happened, but it certainly put America on the map. It certainly was a great day for American art, and it was wonderful -- I think -- that the U.S. government had a hand in this, because, as a long-time cultural attaché myself, I felt that it was very important for American art to be a part of cultural diplomacy, essentially; and, that this was a very, very good way to make that point, and to promote American art as, indeed -- You know, the rest of the world had already figured this out. Why did it take the U.S. government so long to finally put the force of itself behind it?

At any rate, it all happened, and then the movement became a very important part of American art history. The people were wonderful. They all seemed to take it in great stride, and everybody was pleased for Bob Rauschenberg, and all the others involved were delighted that the United States had been honored by this award -- I think for the first time since Whistler, if I'm not mistaken, who did win a prize at the Venice Biennale.

THOMAS: Eighteen-ninety-five.

MCBRIDE: There you go. But that's a long time.

THOMAS: I think there was one other person -- maybe Morris Kantor --

MCBRIDE: Maybe. Maybe.

THOMAS: -- earlier, just a few years earlier.

But were all the artists there?

MCBRIDE: No. I don't think Jasper Johns was there. I don't remember. But I do remember --

THOMAS: Bob was there.

MCBRIDE: Bob was there.

THOMAS: Obviously.

MCBRIDE: Noland was there. I think Claes Oldenburg was there. I'm sure he was there, actually. And I'm trying to remember -- Marcella Louis was there, I remember. She was very pleased that her husband's work had, by this time, attracted so much attention; and, indeed, those were very powerful paintings, and still are.

So there was a huge crowd of people there.

THOMAS: Was Bob a presence? Did he have a sense of -- ?

MCBRIDE: I think he was sort of an instant celebrity. Because while everybody knew about him, because of the hype, basically, through the dealers and through the promotional material that we, the Americans, had put out with our press releases and everything -- and his was, certainly, a very original work -- as, indeed, it all was, in many ways -- but I think his, in particular, struck a responsive chord with many of the jury members. I don't remember who the jury consisted of in those days, but I think Bob suddenly became an instant celebrity, and he didn't exactly take to it like a duck to water. He was, I think, amused and kind of puzzled by all the attention, at first. And he's a very shy person, as you probably know. He was not --

THOMAS: He was, at that time?

MCBRIDE: He was pretty shy. He was not -- I had met him earlier, when there was something here in Washington called the NOW Festival, and he came down and did a piece called *Pelican*. Do you remember *Pelican*?

THOMAS: Yes. I didn't realize you'd been there for that.

MCBRIDE: Yes. That was organized by Alice Denney, basically.

THOMAS: Correct.

MCBRIDE: Alice asked me to help her with that, and that's when I first met many of these people, including Bob Rauschenberg. And Andy Warhol, also, who was then basically known for the Velvet Underground. But it was all quite an interesting time.

Nonetheless, Rauschenberg, I think, had loomed on the larger horizon, in a way, thanks to not the NOW Festival, in particular, but that certainly helped his image. He was a figure that was literally bigger than life, in that one, as you may remember, and it was all very gutsy, in a way, for a sleepy little place like Washington to put something like that on. It got a lot of attention, and I think Rauschenberg was a more retiring person in those days than he was by 1964.

Nonetheless, it was an interesting time, and I think he seemed to be really flattered and pleased with the outcome, but I don't remember anything -- I can't tell you a little story about how he uncorked a bottle of champagne or anything. I just don't remember that. But there was obviously a great deal of celebratory activity around the Consulate and in the pavilion, once this news had gotten out. Everybody back here in Washington was quite pleased -- except, interestingly enough, several of the authorities in USIA, who were more focused on the controversy that all this was generating than the success and the prize. So that there was not rejoicing in the office that I was working in. In fact, I remember that when I got back, my boss and colleagues were called up to talk to the big -- I can't remember who it was at this time. The name eludes me.

At any rate, we had to explain why this was a good thing -- why this was important; and what all this fuss was about; because the Congress, in particular, which had appropriated the funds for this, through Congressman Rooney, from New York, whose name I'll never forget, who was absolutely opposed to all this, because he thought it was decadent, and that it was not the best that America had to offer; and all this "weird art was not what America was all about," he thought.

So we got into a lot of trouble for doing this exhibition --

THOMAS: Really.

MCBRIDE: -- which put a lot of pressure on that office to suck back, and not be quite as outgoing, and as avant-garde as we were, to designate this particular man, to select this exhibition. We were then faced, at that very moment -- because they come in alternate years, as you remember-, for putting together the exhibition for the Biennale of Sao Paulo. We were under the gun then to be sure we didn't do anything as outrageous as all of this Pop Art stuff in Venice. But in the end, we sent a fabulous exhibition by Barnett Newman, who was not exactly a shrinking violet, himself, and his art was -- but it was so cerebrally abstract, his stuff was, and is. But it's powerful, and incredible, and beautiful paintings.

Anyway, there was a lot of pressure on USIA, ultimately resulting in the disbanding of this office. Again, I was involved in this because, at the time, the controversy was such that the budget of the USIA was affected in terms of the Congress' authority to say what we could and could not do, and we were not prevented, but the message was that we would be a lot better off if this office didn't exist anymore.

As a result, the authorities in USIA, at that point, decided that they would pick up, in its entirety, the Fine Arts program, and transfer it to the National Collection of Fine Arts at the Smithsonian - which had agreed, fortunately, to give it a home. At that point, I was invited to become a part

of that transfer, if I wished to; or, to continue with my role in USIA. But since my interest, at this point, was basically in a career in international work, rather than -- I mean, the Fine Arts were all fine, and it would have been a very interesting and exciting, in fact, place to work -- at that point my career objective was headed more toward international work. So instead of opting to be transferred with the program to the Smithsonian, I, instead, opted to stay with USIA. It was not soon after that that I then, also, decided I would join the foreign service, and I was ultimately assigned to the embassy in Paris. That's fast-forward, but it's a good way to stop this, at any rate, because we've come to the end of the Biennale story.

THOMAS: I wanted to go back and just make sure that I understood that when we were talking controversy, the controversy was not that we had presented these Pop artists, in general, and Rauschenberg in particular, but the controversy about pavilion/Consulate.

MCBRIDE: No. The controversy was about the nature of the art that was selected for this. Since it was so avant-garde, and such cutting-edge stuff at the time, it was considered that that was too wild a venture for the U.S. government to be involved with; that we should have taken something a little more conventional and more respectable. They didn't say Grandma Moses, but that's kind of the way these people were thinking, at the time. The controversy that surrounded this exhibition was not what the U.S. government ought to be involved in; therefore, it was not a good thing that the prize had been awarded, because it focused attention on a part of American art that many people, particularly in the Congress, thought was not where our activity ought to be focused.

THOMAS: So this was the only biennale -- the Venice Biennale -- that was orchestrated/produced by the State Department?

MCBRIDE: Actually, it was not. It turned out that -- things change. It did, for several years, remain under the auspices of the Smithsonian -- the National Museum of American Art.

THOMAS: Right. But not the State Department, and the USIA.

MCBRIDE: Not the State Department. But the State Department was still involved, in a sense, because they had to provide some logistical -- because the Smithsonian had no international operation; and, to some extent, willy-nilly, the embassy was going to be involved, because it was taking place outside the United States. There was no way the embassy could not be involved.

But the thing that was important from the Congress's point of view was that the U.S. government's money was not being used to promote this decadent art, basically.

THOMAS: Right. Exactly.

MCBRIDE: Although the Smithsonian had public money, as well, they also found private sources for funding part of this, and were able to carry it on for a while. Ultimately, it did go back to the State Department, and that's another story. It went back to an office that ultimately -- the wheel comes full circle again -- after several assignments overseas, I came back for an assignment in Washington. I'm not sure now. I've got to get my facts straight. I don't remember

it very well, but I think I came back from being cultural attaché at the embassy in Belgrade, in Yugoslavia, and my job was to make some sense of what the U.S. government did with cultural exchanges in a broader sense, because part of the cultural exchange program had remained in the State Department -- the Office Cultural Presentations, it was called, which basically did the performing arts. The Smithsonian, at this point, was still doing the visual arts part. My mandate was to try to pull all this together, and make some sense of it, and try to see that there was one office that did this. Ultimately, what emerged was an operation called ArtsAmerica, which put the two pieces together. I believe it's still going strong, if I'm not mistaken. I've been retired for almost ten years now, so I don't really keep up with the day-to-day.

But for a while I know that the office did, indeed, take on, once again, the responsibility for Venice, and for other -- by this time there were several important, recurring international events that they had assumed responsibility for. The visual arts part was melded, finally, with the performing arts. By this time, the Congress had realized that this was an important manifestation of American culture; that, indeed, was important to show around the world, as part of American achievement. As a result, although the funding was never generous, it was possible, once again, to fund these types of projects with public money. But, by this time, of course, the public/private partnership had become the way to go, and there was almost --and frequently--more private money than public money involved in these projects. Ultimately, it all came back to the U.S. government.

THOMAS: When you were later posted in Paris -- is there anything to say about, by that time, Bob's impact?

MCBRIDE: Oh, yes, absolutely. I don't remember how many years, but a few years had intervened, and by this time he was widely regarded, including in France, as one of the world's leading artists, and had, by this time, I'm pretty sure, had had at least one big show in Paris. He'd certainly been included in many group shows. But his name was very well known across Europe, but, most importantly, in France. By this time, I think a great deal of the credit should go to Ileana Sonnabend, whose gallery represented him from the very beginning, and who -- I think, probably was responsible for at least one of the pictures that went to the '64 Biennale was lent from the Sonnabend Gallery or the Sonnabend Collection. But anyway, the provenance of the work was Paris, basically.

So she promoted him tirelessly, and once the prize had been given it was obviously easier, but it was an uphill struggle because the French, I think, were reluctant to relinquish the mantle of the arbiter of taste in the art world -- which was clearly shifting to America.

But be that as it may, there was no question that the public had resonated very positively to this work. As a result, Rauschenberg was certainly a stellar member of the American art establishment by this time -- there's no question about that -- and I believe he had made several trips to Paris by this time, as well; and, certainly, would turn up occasionally for openings and things like that. I can't be specific, but I do remember that he was certainly well-known in Paris by this time, and by the art press -- *highly* regarded by this time.

THOMAS: I don't know if you're familiar with the ROCI project that Bob initiated in the '80s.

MCBRIDE: Oh, yes.

THOMAS: Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange.

MCBRIDE: I do, indeed. Yes. Yes. I do.

THOMAS: I'm just wondering -- I suspect one could make a connection between --

MCBRIDE: Absolutely.

THOMAS: -- what his experience with the Biennale and his interest in that, particularly in, as you know, the Interchange took place not with the French or the Brits.

MCBRIDE: That's right.

THOMAS: It was in those countries that were either struggling to be democracies --

MCBRIDE: Yes.

THOMAS: -- or would have liked to be democracies.

MCBRIDE: And again, although they didn't seek -- now that I remember about this -- they did not seek U.S. government sponsorship or involvement in this project, because it wanted to be a stand-alone activity by the foundation, or whatever it was called --I can't remember exactly. But I also know that they were not unhappy if the government played a sub-rosa role in all of this, and helping them to identify the kinds of people in those societies that would benefit from this, which we were in a position to do -- and did. I spent a lot of my career in Eastern Europe, and it certainly was a part of what I envisioned my role to be -- to seek out prominent artists in local societies who used their art as a way to make a statement, or to protest, or to do something that focused on their particular plights, because they used art, in a sense, to make a very bold statement about what they thought of the present situation, and the present regime. It obviously had to be done very carefully, because it was very dangerous to do.

I remember once, in Romania, a situation where a huge success at the National Theatre took place, when they did a revival of a classic Moliere play, and the central figure of this piece was, you know, the French king, but it was a clear representation of the megalomania of Ceausescu, at the time. So the art community, in a sense, would take any opportunity it could to raise these issues to a higher level, and the arts were frequently the vehicle -- the visual arts, the performing arts, whatever -- for this kind of expression.

So that's why the Rauschenberg project was so valuable; because it encouraged these people, and it let them know that there were other people who were aware of what they were doing, and that it was important, and that the support that they got from the larger, international art community was terribly important to these local artists. Therefore, that project was worth its weight in gold, and there were several like it. But that one was visible mainly because Rauschenberg was so

visible, even in Eastern Europe in those days. It was certainly a well-known name in the American art world, even though access to his work was very limited.

THOMAS: Right. Right.

MCBRIDE: But it was important.

THOMAS: Oh, good. Well, I've always thought that ROCI was an important project, especially because Bob so strongly believed in it that he funded it totally himself, selling works from his collection to support it.

MCBRIDE: Do you know what it's doing? If there's anything now? If it's still functioning?

THOMAS: Bob seems to have done his work in series, and ROCI was an important series. There was Malaysia, and Tibet, and the Soviet Union, and lots of different places. Then the project ceased, and I don't know if they had decided on a number of countries, and then just to conclude at the end of those countries. But the National Gallery of Art has several pieces of art from the ROCI project.

MCBRIDE: What was the name of the Englishman who did the catalogue raisonnée? No. That was Rothko, wasn't it? It wasn't Rauschenberg.

THOMAS: There is yet to be done --

MCBRIDE: No catalogue raisonnée.

THOMAS: -- a catalogue raisonnée, as yet.

MCBRIDE: Is it in the works?

THOMAS: I don't think so, because when I've asked that question they all blanch -- because it is a formidable task.

MCBRIDE: It would be.

THOMAS: Would you mind if I sort of stepped back (because I didn't realize that you were involved with the NOW Festival), and just ask your impressions of what that was; and, if you can think about it, Bob's role in it?

MCBRIDE: No, I don't mind at all. I'm trying to think about the most visible -- I remember, from my perspective -- I had never seen anything like any of this. I was still an intern in the USIA's Fine Arts program at the time, so it was quite dazzling to meet all these people, who were obviously creating art history, as we were standing there, and it was quite exciting to see this evening unfurl. I remember the opening night. The tickets had all been sold, and I had a call from somebody -- I can't remember who. Because I had a ticket, obviously -- and I called Alice Denney, and said, "Alice, X has asked if we have any more tickets, and I think X ought to go." I

can't even remember who it was. I said, "I'll surrender my ticket," and she said, "You will not! You can't do that! You can't do that! We can't let anybody -- The fire department has already called me and said, 'You cannot have more than 600 people,'" or whatever the fire law for this old theatre. A roller-skating rink it was, actually. So that was, but I remember we got there, and Steve Paxton, I remember, from this group -- because he did this, and what's her name, the dancer --

THOMAS: Carolyn Brown? Simone Forti?

MCBRIDE: It must have been Carolyn Brown.

THOMAS: Yvonne Rainer?

MCBRIDE: Yvonne Rainer. Yvonne Rainer. There was this piece that involved stacks of bricks, and long, long pieces of twine that stretched hundreds of feet, out into the -- and one by one, these were pulled, and the brick work collapsed, sort of. Everybody was just so puzzled, and sort of wondering what all this was about. I'm still wondering what it was all about.

At any rate, all this happened, and then the big event of the evening, to get to Bob, was *Pelican*, and when it happened you could just feel the tension in this place, because everybody had heard about it, but nobody could imagine how it was actually going to look. Because here was this guy going to come in with like wings, connected to his arms, sort of, flying down, and clothed -- if "clothed" is, indeed, the word -- in transparent plastic, basically. The clothing was a piece of cellophane, basically, wrapped across his private parts, or whatever the polite word was to describe that, in those days. He came in on roller skates, and the whole piece was quite amazing. You could hear this sort of gasp in this cavernous arena, when all this happened. Then it suddenly erupted into thunderous applause. It was quite amazing to see the result of it all.

But everybody was quite excited, and nobody knew quite what was going to happen. Because a "Happening" was such a weird term, and it was so new, that nobody could agree on exactly what it meant. So anything could have "happened"; and, indeed, many things did happen.

But he was really a good sport about it. I remember talking a little bit to him, afterwards, and he said he was quite nervous. He was nervous about the piece, first of all. I think he had done it once before, somewhere -- I'm not entirely sure about that. Was it created for this occasion? Or maybe he had rehearsed or something, and he was aware of certain pitfalls that he had to be careful about. But in this context, he was also extremely concerned about the size of these big wings, and actually, maybe, knocking people as he went along. That, I think, was creating part of the angst, and tension a little bit. He was talking about it afterwards. He didn't, as it turned out.

But I do remember that there was, in the broader context -- there was also something about -- the fire department people did turn up, and at one point they wouldn't let anybody else into the building, even though you had tickets. That was hard to handle. I remember going outside with two or three other people who had some connection with this event, trying to placate people, and

say, "There's nothing we can do about this. The fire department will not allow anybody else in here. I'm really sorry. We'll try to open some doors, so you can hear or see a little something."

But people were generally good-hearted about it, but there was nothing anybody could do. The firemen were simply not going to let anybody else in that building. It's gone now, isn't it? Wasn't it torn down a few years ago?

THOMAS: No, it's the "Harris-Teeter" grocery store.

MCBRIDE: The supermarket.

THOMAS: It's now a supermarket. Alice Denney has told me that when they went originally to look at spaces, and they saw this skating rink, that Bob got very excited about it. But that he didn't actually know how to roller skate, so he went back to Brooklyn, as it were, and took roller-skating lessons.

MCBRIDE: Oh, really. I didn't know that. That's funny.

THOMAS: He would use any opportunity to practice, and Trisha Brown told me that he showed up at her apartment, at her loft, and got to the door, on roller skates, and skated in, picked her up, and skated her to the other side of the room. [laughter]

MCBRIDE: I can just see that. Oh, dear.

He was a great guy, though, and a wonderful -- from my point of view, in terms of the cultural stuff, in other incarnations -- you could always count on the success of a show if there were any Rauschenberg works in it. By that I mean, we, the U.S. government, did a lot of print shows, and it was always a sure-fire success if there were a couple of Rauschenberg prints in any of these survey-type shows. Or, in one case, I think I remember, when I was in Madrid -- I know there was a Jasper Johns show, but I think there was, earlier, a Rauschenberg show that was done -- I may be wrong about this-- at the Reina Sophia Museum in Madrid. It was a huge success, mainly because the name of Rauschenberg was still important. There's a person who's now at the Guggenheim, who I believe did one of those shows -- and you ought to talk to her, if you haven't already. Her name is Carmen Jimenez, and she persuaded the Spanish government to take this mental institution and turn it into an art museum. She was working, at that time, in the Ministry of Culture for the Spanish government. She actually supervised, and, I think, became one of the early directors of the museum, and ultimately joined -- she was also involved in the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Ultimately, she moved to New York, and I believe is still the curator of twentieth-century paintings at the Guggenheim, if I'm not mistaken.

Editor Note:
At the time of
the interview,
Carmen
Jimenez was
the Curator of
Twentieth-
Century Art,
Guggenheim
Museum

But she was certainly involved in this earlier Rauschenberg show in Madrid, and she can no doubt tell you some very interesting Spanish stories about it. Because I think there were one or two of his works in a private collection in Madrid, that I was surprised to see, through Carmen. The man's name was Placido Arango, and he was a big Spanish businessman. He, I think, at one time had the distinction of owning the only Rauschenberg in Spain. I remember being very surprised to go to see it, in his house.

But at any rate, Bob was certainly, in terms of the cultural image of the United States, a name and a figure, and his work was constantly discussed -- because he was obviously a seminal figure in American art. There's no question about that. And if you were sitting in an embassy somewhere, trying to promote American culture, it was natural that his name would come up, and you would use references to his work. He wrote some very interesting things. So he was certainly somebody who was an important personality, as far as promoting American culture overseas was concerned.

THOMAS: Thank you.

MCBRIDE: You're very welcome. I hope that was worth something.

THOMAS: Indeed, indeed, indeed.

MCBRIDE: But when you listen to this, and have questions --

[End of Interview]