

## RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Seckler, Dorothy / Oral History / Archives of American Art, 1965

TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

IN NEW YORK

DECEMBER 21, 1965

Interviewer: Dorothy Seckler

DS: Dorothy Seckler

RR: Robert Rauschenberg

DS: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Robert Rauschenberg in New York, on December 21, 1965. Robert, I have just been explaining to you why I am interested in taking the beginnings of this interview back to around the period of 1950. Since critics so often discuss your work in terms of its being, as they suggest, a bridge between abstract expressionism and Pop art, it might be interesting to see how very different it is, how distinct your attitudes and ideas were from either, and from the artists who were figures at either end of that bridge. You were in Algeria or in Casablanca, just before 1953, and perhaps that would be a good point at which to pick it up. You had come back to New York, and were having rather a struggle at that time. As I recall, you were supposed to have been living on Fulton Street on fifteen cents a day. Is that right?

RR: Some days it was twenty-five.

DS: Well, one of the things that struck me about that period of struggle - some of the people who have written about your work have said that

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the reason that you were able to take a position of accepting your environment, as opposed to the abstract expressionists, who were rebellious against theirs, was because -- or they said this about Pop artists in general -- because the artist was much better treated during this period than he had been when the abstract expressionists were coming along. Now here you still were, after having had some very notable shows at Betty Parsons and, I believe, at Egan. And still this period was a struggle. So apparently your attitudes weren't being too much influenced by affluence.

RR: I think one of the main differences in my attitude and that of some of the abstract expressionists was based on the fact that my natural point of view was never cultivated, that the creative process somehow has to include adjusting realistically to the situation. I don't think any one person, whether artist or not, has been given permission by anyone to put the responsibility of the way things are on anyone else. I just don't find it a very interesting motivation to work with the idea that things are difficult, or that I won't accept the fact that things are easy. I think with affluence, which was very foreign to me during the period we're talking about, there are new complications. If you don't have trouble paying the rent, you have trouble doing something else; one needs just a certain amount of trouble. Some people need more trouble to operate and some people need less. And I felt very rich in being able to pick up Con Edison lumber from the streets and

whatever the day would lay out for me to use in my work. In fact, so much so, that sometimes it embarrasses me that I live in New York City as though I'm a guest here.

DS: So that you didn't feel like a hero, being an artist and working under difficulty.

RR: Well, I think that's much too easy a way to be a hero.

DS: Perhaps the word hero slips in there because at this time there was a kind of attitude among a number of the artists of taking a rather heroic stance. Perhaps, this is really something that the critics opposed almost more than the artists, but there was a feeling of the artist having a role outside of society, let's say, and sometimes it could become almost a Messianic role with certain artists. This was not, of course, general. It was part of the attitude that emerged. As you were sitting in club meetings at the Cedar Bar, listening to discussions of that more rebellious attitude, that feeling that the artist has a special role to oppose the demands and the ways of a commercial, materialistic society, can you remember any particular feelings that you had? Or ways in which you expressed them to yourself or to anybody else at that time?

RR: Well, I don't know how accurately I remember. It was certainly a lot more complicated and I felt more involved than probably my generalization about it now. But I was in awe of the painters; I mean I was new in New York, and I thought the painting that was

going on here was just unbelievable. I still think that Bill de Kooning is one of the greatest painters in the world. And I liked Jack Tworikov, himself and his work. And Franz Kline. But I found a lot of artists at the Cedar Bar were difficult for me to talk to. It almost seemed as though there were so many more of them sharing some common idea than there was of me, and at that time the people who gave me encouragement in my work weren't so much the painters, even my contemporaries, but a group of musicians that were working: Morton Feldman, and John Cage, and Earl Brown, and the dancers that were around this group. I felt very natural with them. There was something about the self-assertion of abstract expressionism that personally always put me off, because at that time my focus was as much in the opposite direction as it could be. I was busy trying to find ways where the imagery and the material and the meanings of the painting would be not an illustration of my will but more like an unbiased documentation of my observations, and by observations I mean that literally -- of my excitement about the way in the city you have on one lot a forty-story building and right next to it you have a little wooden shack. One is a parking lot and one is this maze of offices and closets and windows where everything is so crowded. And I remember I was talking to someone about this one time, and they said well, you know, parking lots are the most valuable real estate in New York City because there's absolutely no overhead. And I thought this is so absurd, all these officious looking buildings and actually, the best business would be not to have a building at all. I'm getting a little off the

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subject now.

DS: No, I think that's fascinating, Bob.

RR: It was this constant, irrational juxtaposition of things that I think one only finds in the city. One doesn't find that in the country. I had traveled quite a lot in Europe just previously and I didn't find it there either. There's a kind of an architectural harmony. Whether it's chauvinism or patriotism -- anyway, there's something that tended to unite the people. And so everything abroad that I came in contact with was so much more coherent or cohesive than I found New York. And I think that even today, New York still has more of this unexpected quality around every corner than any place else. It's something quite extraordinary.

DS: Yes. Are there particular sections of the city that appeal to you more than others?

RR: Well, I like way downtown near the Battery. I lived down there at this time and for, I guess, the following -- well, this is where I moved to uptown and I've been here for four years and this is 1965. And this is as far uptown as I've lived except for one period in my life when my wife was carrying my son and under the insistence of my mother-in-law we got a ground floor apartment and lived sensibly for about a year or a year and a half. But I like that area down there because maybe there the contrast is even more emphasized; it's more dramatic. On one side of town you have the largest pet store,

in New York, with all kinds of wonderful animals. At that time they had the Washington Market; that was the only one in the city where you could get all kinds of fresh vegetables and meat. It was like a farmer's market -- and imported cheeses. Then, right within the same block they had wholesale plant places. The flower district is up around 26th Street, but this was a different kind of area. And in the next block they had surplus hardware stores galore. And electronic equipment. And then across town, you had the Fulton fish market. The two were separated only by big business. And during the day, the streets would be so filled with people that it looked like an ant hill that had just been kicked over. And then Bam -- at six o'clock you could hear footsteps three blocks away. And the buildings were the tallest there. I always like being close to water if I have the choice. And if the roasting of coffee wasn't too strong, you could always smell the fish market. I think that is a very rich part of town.

DS: Yes.

RR: But I don't find the rest of the city lacking in this quality I'm talking about. Every time I've moved, my work has changed radically. And I think that if it didn't change radically naturally, then I'd do something about it and I'd force it to change. In this place the light is so different -- you can't tell so much because it's a gray day -- but sometimes the light is so white in

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here, it's not to be believed, because of these skylights. And that's a very different kind of light from other studios that I've been in where the ceilings weren't as high, but maybe the windows were bigger, and so there you'd get the light as it reflected, as it bounced off the floor and it would always be warmed up. All these things I think are the -- well, they certainly, I'd say, are the job of an artist -- to move with these things as though they are additional qualities rather than an attitude about painting which makes one move into a place and force on it a particular working atmosphere that they remember as being the one that they like. And I think that carries through -- I think that attitude also makes a different kind of painting. And whereas my work was never a protest of what was going on, it was only the expression of my own involvement, it always had the possibility of being some other way. But if it were, I guess I'd have to be someone else.

DS: This is all so fascinating, the feelings you had about the city. I can recall that I was told that Franz Kline when he took a place had something covering the window nailed up. I'm very fond of Franz Kline and his work, but it does illustrate a kind of different attitude toward a way of responding to what's around you, yours, as contrasted to some of the feelings of people at that time. Of course, in other ways, you and Franz might have easily shared a sympathy. I can remember the talk he gave at the Museum of Modern Art in which Shredded Wheat played a very important part. Do you remember that talk?

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RR: No.

DS: It was on abstract expressionism, and all the critics, Aline Saarinen and I don't remember who else, had all spoken very intellectually; and Franz got up and just went on for, oh, a long, long time about the different things, about getting up, and Shredded Wheat -- right in close to the experience of the moment.

RR: He was beautiful with some pet words like that; Nanook of the North was one of them that he played with. And also his idea about somehow London was the answer to all the good ideas in taste. And Princess Margaret was his idea of when a girl was really beautiful, "like Princess Margaret." I mean it was just a feeling he had; it was all an abstraction. I don't think he wanted everybody to look English or anything but it was a style.

DS: I can remember one time when I was in the Cedar Bar and I was wearing a suit that had rather nice tailoring and he came up and said, "Ah, that looks like a suit with English tailoring. Wasn't that made in London?" It wasn't, as a matter of fact. But it was so surprising to me because, you know, from everything I knew about Franz and his way of life, elegance of that kind was not something that I would have expected him to be concerned with.

RR: And he wasn't.

DS: No, I'm sure he wasn't.

RR: It was just one of his fantasies.

DS: Yes. It was a very interesting fantasy. You're quite right. Using the word elegance reminds me of something else that I wanted to ask you about at this time, and I think it can easily be cleared up. I recall reading Mr. Tompkins' very interesting article in The New Yorker about how you began collecting waste materials from where you were living, as you said, the Con Edison wood and so on. It was sort of an implication that the reason the materials were inelegant or everyday, ordinary things, was because you were poor and those were the things that were around. Well, there might have been an implication that if you had been living in a posh environment then you might have included, let's say, gold chandeliers and so on. Then I later came across the reminder that you had made a kind of collage with gold leaf and one very similar in toilet paper.

RR: Right.

DS: So it made an interesting comment on each other.

RR: That was earlier... it was right after the all black and all white pictures. And there had been a lot of critics who shared the idea with a lot of the public that they couldn't see black as color or as pigment, but they immediately moved into associations and the associations were always of destroyed newspapers, of burned newspapers. And that began to bother me. Because I think that I'm

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never sure of what the impulse is psychologically. I don't mess around with my subconscious. I mean I try to keep wide awake. And if I see in the superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with, cliches of association, I change the picture. I always have a good reason for taking something out but I never have one for putting something in. And I don't want to, because that means that the picture is being painted predigested. And I think a painting has such a limited life anyway. Very quickly a painting is turned into a facsimile of itself when one becomes so familiar with it that one recognizes it without looking at it. I think that's just a natural phenomenon. It may be -- I think it is even an important one. I don't think that we have the strength over a period of years to see things always as though we hadn't ever looked at them before -- to see them new. There may be someone that you're very close to and you see them every day. If they take a two weeks' trip or you take a two weeks' trip, it's only for about the first fifteen minutes when you're back together that you notice how they have changed from the idea that you have of the way they look. And then one's readjusted. I think the same thing happens to painting. So if you do work with known quantities making puns or dealing symbolically with your materials, I think you're shortening the life of the work even before it's had a chance to be exposed. I mean, it hasn't had a life of its own. It's already leading someone else's life.

DS: That's a fascinating point.

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RR: And when I did the -- well, as I said, I wasn't sure that I really might have been using materials because they were old or liked black with newspaper because of the burned-out look. But I certainly didn't like the idea of tortured, tarred, because I don't think that you torture newspaper. A newspaper that you're not reading can be used for anything; and the same people didn't think it was immoral to wrap their garbage in newspaper. And I think, you know, that that's a very positive use for a newspaper. So I did a painting, or a couple of each, one in toilet paper collage, trying to duplicate it in gold leaf. And I studied both paintings very carefully and I saw no advantage to either. I mean, whatever one was saying the other seemed to be able to be just as articulate. So that I knew then that it was someone else's problem, not mine.

SIDE TWO

RR: We have an auxiliary in case your tape machine isn't working, which is your memories.

DS: My memory is a very poor auxiliary. What you're saying is fascinating and I would be desolate indeed if the machine didn't work. Just to keep in the general period; we've jumped about a bit which I'm happy about; back before when you mentioned the black paintings and, of course, the black paintings belong to the same period as the white paintings.

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RR: Yes. Excuse me, you know you were talking about the difference in my work during those years and the work that was going on?

DS: Yes.

RR: There was a whole language that I could never make function for myself in relationship to painting and that was attitudes like tortured, struggle, pain. And I never could -- I don't know whether it was from my Albers training or my own personal hangup, but I never could see those qualities in paint.

DS: You had, of course, seen them in life.

RR: I could see them in life. And I could see them in representational art that illustrates that fact pictorially. But I never saw in the materials this conflict and I knew that it had to be in the attitude of the painter and a kind of interpretation of the attitude that existed separately, so that if in the future one were to lose the idea that those paintings were made from -- that it would be very possible to have a completely different attitude about the painting.

DS: We were speaking before about the life of a painting and the instability of perception in regard to painting. I think it was Duchamp who had a theory that it's true that the painting has a lifetime; I think he said fifteen years, I'm not sure -- do you remember that?

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RR: Yes.

DS: Then apparently, however, it comes back into perception for another generation or for posterity possibly on some other basis. And this is what you're saying now that if two hundred years from now when black may have all sorts of other associations ...

RR: Right.

DS: This anguish that was being put in by some abstract expressionist might not be perceived, but the painting may have a different life. In other words, they may bring some other qualities.

RR: I think necessarily it will. I'm sure we don't read old paintings the way they were intended.

DS: No.

RR: I think it is what may be part of my naivete but I think that painting being as extreme as it is now, and it was only extreme in the past by degrees, at this moment in New York you have old masters, new masters, no masters, people painting in all kinds of styles and they all celebrate a certain amount of recognition and tolerance and communication between each other.

DS: If I may say so, you had something to do with it, because at the

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time when you came on the scene, this was not so.

RR: It didn't feel like it; I know that. I felt very isolated, but I felt reasonably isolated. I mean I thought there was a good basis for the separation because the points of view were very different.

DS: Did you feel at the same time that the position of some of the abstract expressionists had also opened the way for you? In the sense I'm thinking of this, that at least one of the main results of their point of view had been to restore to the painting a sense of its being an object. Here I'm thinking perhaps even more of -- we haven't mentioned Rothko -- but the idea came in at one point, of the painting as an environment. Barnett Newman told me that he even urged -- he put a sign in an exhibition saying, "Move up close to the painting."

RR: Yes.

DS: In other words, not looking at it from a distance, but there it is as an object. Well, while your attitude of what you were going to do with that object was completely different, it was a canvas right in front of you; it was a two-dimensional phenomenon; it was a phenomenon like other objects.

RR: Yes.

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DS: Would that have been important?

RR: Yes, I'm sure that the climate for my involvement was right. Pollock also ... wanted one to be wrapped in the painting. And also the new excitement and variety of ways that the abstract expressionists were applying paint. You could put it on as though it were colored air and it would be painting. Or you could stack it on so thick that it would be a relief. And all of this, all these physical aspects of painting at that time excited me very much. You could do a picture in just black and white. I mean all the things, whether you're soliciting permission or not, do give you permission.

DS: Did you ever do any pictures in which the pigment was applied in an airy way? Or were you always more apt to work with a very active brush, and so on?

RR: I remember how at different times I had different preoccupations. One of my preoccupations at a period was that I wouldn't use the same color when I broke loose from those monochromes. And it was after the red. I wouldn't use the same color in a picture in more than one place. And another was, even though it was an intellectual idea and with its built in limitations, I tried to imply with the different ways that the paint went on, that even though I might know only seventeen that there were thousands.

DS: Coming back to the other thing that you mentioned -- that you had

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been at that time very closely associated with John Cage and with other musicians -- I know that many people have assumed that because of your association, that accident and a philosophy, an outlook of accident was important to your work, since it had apparently been in Cage's. And I gather that this was not your feeling, that you were once quoted as saying that you didn't believe in accident any more than anything else. Was that a strongly developed attitude?

RR: I was very interested in many of John's chance operations. Each one seemed quite unique to me. I liked the sense of experimentation that he was involved in. But painting is just a different medium and I never could figure out an interesting way to use any kind of programmed activity. And even though chance deals with the unexpected and the unplanned, it still has to be organized before it can exist. I think maybe chance works better in a situation like music because music exists over a period of time, and you don't maintain constantly the -- you can't refer back from one area to another area. One's familiarity or lack of familiarity with time is very different from, say, the size of a canvas, which is what I would compare it to. One can see that a canvas is six feet by eight feet, say, quite accurately. But you can spend two minutes and think it's five, or thirty seconds and it's just a different bed for activities there. The only thing that I could get with chance, and I never was able to use it, was that I would end up with something quite geometric or the spirit that I was interested in, indulging in, was gone. I felt as though I was carrying out an idea rather than witnessing an unknown idea taking shape. If this is called accident I certainly used accident, and I certainly used the fact that wet

paint will run, and lots of other things. It seems to me it's just a kind of friendly relationship with your material where you want them for what they are rather than for what you could make out of them. I did a twenty-foot print and John Cage is involved in that because he was the only person I knew in New York who had a car and who would be willing to do this. And I poured paint on one Sunday morning. I glued, it must have been fifty sheets of paper together; it was the largest paper I had, and stretched it out on the street. He had an A Model Ford then and he drove through the paint and on to the paper and he only had the direction to try to stay on the paper. And he did a beautiful job of it. Now I consider that my print. It's just like working with lithography. You may not be a qualified printer but there again, like the driver of the car, someone who does know the press very well collaborates with you and they are part of the machinery just as you are part of another necessary aspect that it takes to make anything. Would you call that accident?

DS: Actually, I'm not sure I'd call anything accident. When paint drips it's like an insurance company -- say a man crosses the street and is hit by a car. To that particular individual, it is an accident. But to insurance companies who have tables showing how many people will be hit by a car that year, it's an expected event.

RR: Yes.

DS: And in a sense though you don't know exactly where a drip will run, it may wiggle a little in the middle, you know that there's gravity

and you know that paint will drip and so on.

RR: You know that it's not going to run up.

DS: That's right. So there's a certain element in which some of the things that were called chance weren't.

RR: Anyway, they weren't all done with -- I know maybe this is what you're getting at -- they weren't done with some kind of wild abandon where you just shut your eyes and throw things about.

DS: Yes. Well, I don't think anyone ever imagines that would be possible. Now one other thing that I thought might be a parallel ....

RR: I'm not saying that they're better for it. But that just never interested me.

DS: ...was the use of intervals because I understand in John Cage's work that he often emphasizes interval and waiting and silences a great deal. And I notice that you have also emphasized leaving open spaces in your paintings and areas in which there is less happening and those work very beautifully in relationship to the things that are happening very fast in other parts of the canvas; and I thought perhaps that there may have been a kind of sharing of feeling about this kind of thing, of the importance of interval and openness.

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RR: Well, it's no secret that we admired each other's work very much, and still do. But I think that those are like some feeling of variety within a restricted area that are important to -- if you're dealing with multiplicity and variation and inclusion as your content, then any feeling of a complete feeling of consistence or sameness is a violation of that attitude; and I had to work consciously to do work that would imply the kind of richness and complexity that I saw around me; and I think those things just got into it. One of my painter friends says I'm awfully good at the edges. It was intended as a joke but I think that that may be true; but there's been a conscious attempt for me to treat any area whether I only have half an inch more before I hit the wall, or whether it's dead center, to not treat any one area with a kind of dramatic preference. I dealt with that several ways. One is with a kind of simple-minded formal idea about composition by just putting something of no consequence dead center so that when you look there, yes, there it is, but you see that certainly doesn't matter any more than anything else; that's not what the center is for. So that ideas of sort of relaxed symmetry have been something for years that I have been concerned with because I think that symmetry is a neutral shape as opposed to a form of design.

DS: There's quite an important group of younger painters now who are interested in symmetry and in a sense it almost returns to something Byzantine it seems to me.

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DS: In a curious way the whole thing seems to have come full circle. Whereas your work has always seemed almost the most opposite of Byzantine. There's no sense of hierarchy at all; you can't make a hierarchy out of things in your paintings. Nothing can be assigned a position beyond or above anything else so that the relativism is complete, I'd say, as opposed to the structure, which moves up from a base to a high point in which every position is fixed. This is an aside, and I don't want to take up too much time, but I just wondered in passing how you react to the importance that these new painters are giving to symmetrical design, all over and symmetrically centered.

RR: I enjoy most of it. I think I said this earlier, but I have never felt that one way of working excludes another. In fact, I think that one of the aspects of my work that I criticize myself for the most is the fact that so many people recognized it as a way of working as an end in itself, so that the influence that the work has had on other artists to work in what I think they would call the same direction is really one of the work's weaknesses. And I have forced myself -- well, if I were interested in styles, I've run through a good many.

DS: That you have.

RR: And it's always a pleasure to give them up because I feel if one

takes an overall point of view, sees my work in general as, you know, massed, then I think that that point can be made. I'm not so facile that I can accomplish or find out what I want to know or explore enough of the possibilities and a way of making a painting, say, in just one painting or two paintings. Sometimes a period of say, silk screen, or all those all-red paintings or the ones that I did after the all-red ones which I called pedestrian colors. Maybe one will be made up of thirty paintings, maybe one will be made up of fifteen paintings. I can't tell. There's no desire to mount. I use as a guide for this, when things seem to work out consistently. It takes three or four paintings to really decide whether you're just having a lucky streak or whether you have somehow within yourself made some accomplishment that lets working this way be easier for you, where you're more apt to be successful than unsuccessful. And then when I definitely decide that that's the case, well then it's just gone. I mean I just start something else. And I never seem to have any particular problem about like people say, what are you going to do next? And usually while I'm working one way, there's another attitude that's growing which as often as not is a reaction from what I'm doing.

DS: Almost the reverse of it perhaps?

RR: Yes.

DS: Would that have been the case just before your show that was called Oracle? I mean how did that very different adventure come about?

Well, I suppose it wasn't so different from some of the objects you'd made before.

RR: Oracle was -- I had started it I guess two and a half years ago, maybe even longer than that, closer to three. And it was going to be a radio painting but a concert variation. I did Broadcast, a painting that has three radios in it but only two tuning knobs, one for volume and one for tuning. And I objected to the fact that one had to be standing so close to the picture that the sound didn't seem to be using the space and the way the images were reacting to each other. And that was all right. That was one aspect of it. But through that, having made that and feeling that limitation with that piece, I wanted to do something that was remote control, that could be separated in the room. I had some canvases stretched, but it took so long I needed help with the radios. And it took so long for me to find the help that I used the paintings for something else. Then later I decided that was a good idea because once I started seeing what was involved I saw that with the weight problem, and the depth the painting would have to be to house the equipment, that painting was the wrong form for that to take. So I started on a sculpture. Then I went to Amsterdam to work at the Stadtljk Museum with what was going to be a collaboration of about five artists, or six. And because I was working in sculpture I had three weeks; we found that our ideas were so different that it was very difficult to get together and just make a piece.

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DS: Was that with Tinguely? Was he one of the people?

RR: Yes, Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Per Utvet, Martial Raysse,  
Daniel Spurry.

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TAPE NO. 2

DECEMBER 21, 1965

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY SECKLER

DS: This is Dorothy Seckler continuing a tape with Robert Rauschenberg on December 21, 1965. At the point where we had left off in our previous reel you had mentioned your participation or intended participation with a group of other artists at the Stedelijk Museum in Holland. I think we might take up at this point what actually happened to that project.

RR: Right. The form that the exhibition took finally was that each person just picked a part of the museum. It was a very interesting experiment for the museum, by the way, because they wanted the artists, instead of just shipping and picking a lot of work, they trusted the artists that they picked to respond in this time in some way or another, doing works that they would show -- whatever the artist made. I thought that was kind of beautiful for a museum.

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DS: Yes.

RR: And the artists were given a salary; they were given money for materials and all the transportation.

DS: And a studio, I assume?

RR: Well, the Museum itself functioned as a studio. They had emptied out about, well -- it's a very large museum and we took, I think, almost a quarter of the museum. And each artist then just picked a spot in the museum that he wanted to work and just started in that area. So I was working with the sculpture which became Oracle with the radios. And painting didn't really interest me. So in a kind of crash program of three weeks I made four pieces of sculpture and some of them quite large. One of them is about ten or twelve feet high and was very densely massed, about eight feet by five feet, and twelve feet high. That was by far the largest work. But I'm not really a sculptor in any traditional sense. I tend to work with materials that are a little heavier and put them together as practically as I can. By being a sculptor, I mean I don't weld or solder.

DS: How did you put them together?

RR: Just with bolts and nails and wire. And I was working alone. I could have had help there except that the way I work I can never tell anybody what to do to help me unless it is just a very simple

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thing like "drill three holes here." And there wasn't enough of that kind of work for me to warrant my getting over the language barrier. I mean by the time I could have told someone how little they could help me, I could have done it three times myself. But then that had its disadvantages because a lot of the material I was working with -- it was a very large room and things were in that scale -- were really too heavy for me. So it was practically disastrous to my health. I was laid up for weeks afterwards. And not to mention the cuts and bruises dealing with airplane parts and things falling. So by the time I left there I had worked so frantically, because I started running out of time, too, and the last week I never even went home from the museum. If I got terribly tired, I'd just lie down on the floor for a few minutes. Because there was no way, as you know, there's no way of hurrying some things. There's no way of anticipating how much time it's going to take. At a certain time you just are through. And I still worked on it a couple of days after the exhibition opened.

DS: Had the sound equipment been sent over there?

RR: No, I didn't have sound then. I wasn't continuing this piece, you see. The pieces I made did happen to have sound, but it wasn't radio sound. I had an electric air pump attached loosely enough as part of the sculpture so that the vibrations of the motor would make a constant rattle and then the air went into a large tub of water and you had this bubbling all the time in contrast with the ....

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DS: But the water didn't run freely?

RR: No, it was a closed thing. It was just that the air passing through it made this gurgling. And another piece had clocks that had all been tampered with. We had nine large clocks in it all running at different speeds, some just zipping around and others, you know, barely moving.

DS: Did that interest you?

RR: I got so -- I was really just sick of sculpture. Nothing appealed to me more when I got back than the gentility of a beautifully stretched piece of canvas. I couldn't break anything as I crossed the room, and if it fell on me it wouldn't hurt a bit. So that the piece then that I was working on, the radio piece, was put aside. And then I just worked on it from time to time, mostly in relationship to the experimentation with the radios to see how that would work. I came back from tour recently with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and I'm going to move my studio. I had had my silk screens destroyed while I was gone so that I wouldn't fall back on that. I really wanted to work. I think there's something about moving and coming back that before you can begin on something new -- well, I find it morally difficult to simply abandon a work and I got very interested in the sculpture again. I made two additional pieces and worked on the sound, and so on.

DS: Has it continued to interest you since then? I mean, are you likely to resume?

RR: I think the radio piece probably is the closest thing to what I'm about to do next as one can predict without knowing where one's going, because I like very much that mixture of technology and aesthetics.

DS: I was interested in what you said last time we talked, I think, about the sound having been important in shifting the focus of the audience, in a sense, in that insuring a certain movement through the exhibition ...

RR: Literally.

DS: Literally, yes.

RR: You had a sense of distance that as often as not was distorted. You had the feeling possibly of knowing where you were but where you were was lost.

DS: That's very expressive. And another thing that you had mentioned which we haven't recorded was your feeling that it was important that the sound frequencies, that the radio sources, be actual ones, not taped; and your feeling that if you had been able to tape them, it would have been rather like commercial art in that not being an actual ...

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RR: Yes.

DS: Would you like to enlarge on that in any way?

RR: No, I think that just about says it. I like for the sound to be as fresh as the daily fall of the dust and rust and dirt that accumulates, which doesn't mean that one doesn't clean it off from time to time. But then that's another thing. It's an actuality of a literal insistence on the piece's operating and existing in the time situation that it's observed in. It's another one of those things trying to put off the death of the work.

DS: Yes. Did I hear you mention before that you had in mind possibly using at some time in the future a piece in which the wind might work as an actual force?

RR: Yes. I'd like to work with wind and water and plants. It sounds like it's going to be a garden, but I don't think it's going to be, but if it turns out to be a garden that may be my own sneaky way of moving out into the country. I hope I don't pick this new building out just in order to discover that what I really needed was a farm. In fact, having two dogs now is also an indication that I'm trying to get out.

DS: I think so. Siberian dogs are going to be moving you out into the

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great open spaces any moment.

RR: Maybe it's bigger than I am.

DS: I think that would be the cream of the jest for the art world: that the man who was sort of responsible for introducing the whole urban environment into painting moves to the country and becomes a collaborator with sun and wind and rain and flowers.

RR: And beaches.

DS: And beaches, yes. That would be very beautiful.

RR: I might move out there and find that all the work is finished. At that point I might just become a collector of vegetables ... and I could be a critic on waves.

DS: Yes. And I could come into the studio and start fooling around with some of this lovely stuff here.

RR: Right.

DS: The bit about the other end of that bridge that we started off with sometime ago, I realize that the point about inclusiveness makes a question about your responses to your so-called descendents in Pop art perhaps superfluous. But I thought it might be kind

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of interesting to try to separate in any way that we can the distinct differences that exist between your outlook and those of some of the leading Pop artists. Of course we haven't really done all of our in-between traveling to bring us up to the point where Pop art appeared. You did mention at some point that you saw a great many people taking what you had some as a kind of -- well, simply new kinds of materials, collaging and tires and posters and so on as a new aesthetic element without taking along with it or perceiving that there was a great deal more involved than unorthodox materials.

RR: I don't think there's anything really wrong with influence because I think that one can use another man's art as material either literally or just implying that they're doing that, without it representing a lack of a point of view. But I also like seeing people using materials that one is not accustomed to seeing in art because I think that has a particular value. New materials have fresh associations of physical properties and qualities that have built into them the possibility of forcing you or helping you do something else. I think it's more difficult to constantly be experimenting with paint over a period of many, many years. Like Ad Reinhardt said to me one day, and I took it as a compliment until he had finished his remark. He said, "I saw your show." I think it was the Egan show. He said, "I saw your exhibition."

He said, "Those are very good pictures." And I said, "Thank you." And he said, "Yes, it's too bad." He said, "Somehow we just can't help but get better." And I couldn't agree with him more.

DS: And I suppose that explains your destruction of the silk screens that everyone was so fascinated by. Does that mean that you don't ever ...?

RR: That's my own personal relationship with them. It doesn't mean that I won't ever use silk screens again. I just don't have any appetite for them now. But it would have been very easy to come back after being away from the studio for eight months and simply pick up, even though the concepts and the sense of the construction, the choice of color and all of that might have been different. I think the temptation to just use the screens I already had made would have been too great. And I think it's important for an artist to know his weakness and use it well. I think that the difference in the work that I would have done with silk screen after I got back from the tour and being away from painting would not have been as great as it will be, because I'm having to work in some entirely different medium.

DS: I suppose I should ask this while it's on my mind. You have, of course, resumed work with silk screen in connection with a commission from Life?

RR: Yes.

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DS: ... To do a series dealing with the theme of Dante.

RR: I had intended to do that with lithography, but there was a, I don't know what you'd call it, a legal question there. It's absurd to do a single print as elaborate as that would have to have been. I mean, it's just uneconomical. In making prints, one of the values is that you can make several copies or that it is possible to have an edition. And the legal tie-up there was that if Life Magazine commissions a work, it has to have an exclusive. I would have had to have made an edition of one. So then I thought, well, how will I get all this photographic material down, and I thought of silk screens. I had about twenty-five photographs, because the scale was magazine scale, reduced to one screen. And it was like having just that many palettes but instead of lots of colors laid out you had all of these images on one surface.

DS: It was a very handsome and very provocative piece. One of the things that I'm sure you've been asked a great deal about the Life piece is something dealing with its imagery. The various photographic materials deal with areas in contemporary life that are readily identifiable -- the Negro question, the Jewish issue, the atom explosion, the bomb, concentration camps; apparently -- I'm not sure exactly where the photomontage of bodies came from.

RR: Yes, it is.

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DS: And in a most exciting way. The question that I suppose occurred to me was that -- well, Mr. Sullivan and other people who have written about your work have always insisted that your intention was one of creating an imagery which remained ambiguous, which could not be pinned down, which could not be directly related to issues. And also, of course, it has been said, or I think perhaps people were interpreting at least what you had said yourself, as taking no position in any attitude of reform concerning the world we live in. Does this represent an exception to that attitude?

RR: No, personally I do take a stance in questions like race issues and atrocities of all sorts. But the Dante illustration -- one of the problems there was that I was illustrating.

DS: Yes.

RR: Some one asked me yesterday if I really see today as being all made up of hell. And, of course, no is the answer to that. But if one is illustrating hell, one uses the properties that make hell. I've never thought that problems were so simple politically that they could, by me anyway, be tackled directly. But every day by consistently doing what you do with the attitude that you do it, if you have strong feelings those things are expressed over a period of time or in a few words as opposed to, say, one Guernica.

DS: Yes.

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RR: And that's just a different attitude. When I was working on Dante, it was during the election year with Nixon and Kennedy. A historian will be able to read that that's when the Dante thing was done. So that I have never thought that -- well, I consider the other for me anyway, almost a commercial attitude of illustrating your feelings about something self consciously. If you feel strongly, it's going to show there. I mean, that's the only way it can come into my work. And I believe it's there. The one thing that has been consistent about my work is that there has been an attempt to use the very last minutes in my life and the particular location as the source of energy and inspiration, rather than retiring to some kind of other time, or dream, or idealism. I think cultivated protest is just as dreamlike as idealism. Does that answer that?

DS: Yes, I think it answers it very beautifully.

RR: When I started the Dante illustrations the idea really was to see. I had been working purely abstractly for so long, it was important for me to see whether I was working abstractly because I couldn't work any other way, or whether I was doing it out of choice. So I really welcomed, insisted, on the challenge of being restricted by a particular subject, which meant that I would have to be involved in symbolism. I mean the illustration has to be read. It has to relate to something that already is in existence. Well, I spent two and a half years deciding yes, I could do that. And I think

that all these things that you do -- it seems to me they can sound rather schoolroomish, like insisting that you make yourself do this to see if you can do it. But it's so easy to be undisciplined. And to be disciplined is so against my character, my general nature anyway, that I have to strain a little bit to keep on the right track.

End of Side One

Side Two

DS: You were just talking about disciplines when I interrupted.

RR: I think that one of the reasons that I have been so preoccupied with theatre is that it has in an extreme form two of the things that I like. I like the necessary control that one has to have in order to work with other people to put on a piece of theatre. One has to be on the one hand extremely aware of things like tape recorders and what time a piece starts; the responsibility with the lights; one has to have an understanding of the light board; one has to communicate clearly with whoever is running the light board. It's just the opposite end of the kind of freedom that one has to then necessarily be involved with in order to do the piece. And I think I try to do pieces where every move is not choreographed, but it is planned and there's a great deal of open trust within an image on the stage. I'm talking about the performance now, as

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opposed to the discipline of the organization that makes the performance possible, makes it possible for you to see one, or to get to the theater on time, or have the show ready to start. Within the image, there is a kind of freedom that allows one to be much better one time and not as good another. As in painting, it may be the same color, but sometimes red looks better than it does in other paintings. It's a combination of the necessary co-existence of the known and the unknown in a positive relationship, a constructive relationship to each other. Without one or the other, the event wouldn't be possible. I guess it's a kind of a fight against dualism, using dualism as using both yes and no at the same time to say yes, I hope.

DS: I was fascinated by the Happening that you presented in the past few weeks, the imagery, the action. References were very beautiful and very inexplicit. I wondered if there's anything you'd like to say about the way the sequence developed, or, the first impulses that may have brought it about and how it was changed perhaps by people who were in it and by other circumstances.

RR: I don't call my theatre pieces Happenings. Because of my involvement with theatre through dance, I think I'd refer to them as dance theatre or maybe just theatre or anything else, because my understanding of Happenings is that they came out of a desire painters had who were working with objects, or objects were their content, their subject, a desire to animate those materials. I think mine

I think mine comes out of really quite a traditional response to dance. The way I begin is by just having an idea and then if that idea isn't enough, I have another idea, and a third, and a fourth, and composition could be described as an attempt to mass all these things in such a way that they don't contrast or interfere with each other, that you never set up a sense of cause and effect or contrast like black and white; but that they either calmly or less calmly just happen to exist at the same time. So one of my main problems in composing a piece is how to get something started and how to get it stopped without breaking a sense of the whole unit that more or less should look continuous and anti-climactic, or -- I don't know the word for it when one thing simply follows another -- progressive. Progressive relationship with the elements. And it's very much the way I work with the paintings. They're the same kinds of problems.

DS: Yes. Does the performance have a title? I'm sorry I didn't get a program.

RR: Yes. Map Room Two. The first Map Room was a sketch, really, for what became Map Room Two, which was done at Goddard College, just going up there and staying a week, and at the end of the week giving a performance, working with things that were there and having the ideas on the spot. It would have been impossible to do Map Room One in a theatre, the Cinematek Theatre, where I did Map Room Two, because of just the difference in the architecture of the place.

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And when it's at all possible, I like to draw people's attention to the fact that this is a different place that they're in, rather than assuming that the stage is where all the magic action is. There was very little to do with the Cinematek that way.

DS: With the white cards?

RR: That's right. Actually that did move out into the audience.

DS: Yes.

RR: That the audience, which had it been an average situation would have been an inactive part, just on the receiving end of the theatre experience, became a necessary element by using their cooperation, first voluntarily asking them to put the white cardboards on their backs ...

DS: Then the lights played over them.

RR: And then using the cardboards as a movie screen ...

DS: That was great.

RR: Which if you'd been sitting in the first row, you wouldn't even have known it was happening, probably.

DS: I liked that. There was another sequence that was interesting in relationship perhaps to your painting although, of course, most of it was related more to dancing. The sequence in which you erased an image into existence, instead of out of existence, I thought was beautiful.

RR: I hadn't thought of that.

DS: Well, it did seem very much related to your painting at that point but otherwise, of course, one was more involved with action. And it was interesting that you were also a performer and that lovely last sequence where you were very high and very poised and picking up neon wands of colored light in a very poised and deliberate way.

RR: Yes, I used my body as a conductor of electricity by holding a live coil in one hand.

DS: Yes, that was remarkable.

RR: And then just with the contact with the neon tubes, they came on. I consider that piece more successful than some others that I've done simply because maybe it's that I've done enough pieces so that a collective vocabulary is being built up. But I'm now beginning to see more and more things that are possible to do. And if one's body can be a conductor of electricity, there are all kinds of

materials that one could use and activate by hand dancing that, rather than -- it's like moving the controls out onto the stage. I like for the lighting man, if the setup permits it, for whoever is running the lights to be visible. And if something has to be moved onto the stage, that one does it in the most simple, direct fashion. That you just walk over and pick it up and put it there, rather than the proscenium type hiding where everything is supposed to look effortless. I nearly never choreograph expressions for the people that I work with. I think that their bodies should be working totally. They should look as though they are doing something easily. If it's difficult, necessarily, I don't want any mask of the activity. It seems to me that it's so difficult in art particularly to -- now I'm finding out the same thing is true in real estate -- to keep in direct touch with exactly what's going on. I think that in the last twenty years or so, there's been a new kind of honesty in painting where painters have been very proud of paint and have let it behave openly. I mean, this has been used for different reasons, probably as many different reasons as there are different artists. But it's very rare -- well now there's a new kind of paint which hides it. Like you said before, things have sort of worked their way all the way around again. But for a long time now, one could see a brushload of paint almost as though it had just been put on the canvas, and the artist had just walked away, rather than using the paint only to build an illusion about something else or, say, only wanting the color

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aspect of paint. All these things are being separated, each one used independently. And I think it's a very exciting time.

DS: The element of the audience participating in the work of art by its psychological attitude, even by its movement is something that has become more and more pronounced in the last decade. And your directness in dealing with an audience or your involving them even when they weren't aware of it. For instance, the white paintings, of course, where shadows were cast and people didn't appreciate this very much but it was still part of your conception.

RR: They had to go all the way across town to see a shadow of themselves. I can see that they might resent it. Think of the happy few, though, who really thought it was worth it. You'd really go away holding your head up.

DS: But even in many other kinds of work, your combines and your silk screens too, I think there's always been a way of making the audience re-experience its own experience in front of the object; and I've often wondered also if this process doesn't continue after leaving the object. If another part of the effect of work like yours isn't really not only what happens when you're looking at it, but going away and then meeting in life some of the same elements with a new awareness of what they were like when they were in a different ensemble.

RR: I'm sure that's happened. The most recent example of that was fan mail that I got from London after the Whitechapel Show. And if I would have answered the letters, I think I would have put the people down a bit for wanting to give me credit for their having looked at where they were going instead of just concentrating on leaving one place and arriving at another place, as though that in between was not part of the trip. Their wanting to compliment the painting for making them do that is kind of an escape.

DS: We lose that innocence very readily, however, and necessarily, because life demands that we keep our attention focused on action and jobs and so on. And, of course, the painter's privilege is to let us tear away that veil that intervenes between us in a visual sense.

RR: Well, I think that it's a little more involved than that. I think a particular form of logic and an idea of progress may be protestant or something, but we've been encouraged through language and philosophies of all sorts that the important thing is to move from one place to another. And it's that point and it's getting there that's important, and getting where then gets to be the only other aspect of that, and it's only incidental how you get there.

DS: Yes.

RR: People are very tolerant of any means of getting there. And I don't see that it's reasonable that there be that hierarchy of like where you go to is more important than how; because you're spending time. It's the same kind of time as you're going to have when you get there. And it's you. And you exclude, you falsely, cultivatedly denied the experience of what there is in between.

DS: Paul Tillich seems to feel that's particularly an American disease because of our tendency as a people to have this dynamic movement forward.

RR: Oh, I don't think so. I think it may be even more so in Europe.

DS: Do you?

RR: Because they're very programmed. Thousands of years of inhibitions have forced them to concentrate on a single aspect, to understand that this is valuable, this is not valuable.

DS: There's that hierarchy again.

RR: Yes.

DS: Well, I'm glad that you feel that we have some slight freedom from that in this particular environment. I think you certainly contributed to it in terms of the art world. That note of hierarchy

breaking is such a very simple one, I think, from everything you said today, that I think it's not a bad one on which perhaps to wind up today.

RR: Okay.

End of Tape Two, Side Two

End of Interview

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October 3, 1984

Robert Rauschenberg  
P.O. Box 54  
Laika Lane  
Captiva, FL  
33924

Dear Mr. Rauschenberg:

Enclosed you shall find a transcript of the interview you did with Dorothy Seckler, which was requested on the phone yesterday by Bradley Fray. There is no need to return the photocopy.

If, after reading the transcript, you decide you want to retain the restriction, you may indicate this on the consent and gift form, and the interview will stay restricted.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Catherine M. Keen  
Archives Assistant

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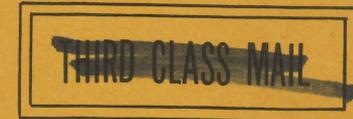
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RR ~~RADIO~~ <sup>TAPED</sup> interview  
w/ Dorothy Seckler  
1965

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