

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Garrels, Gary / "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg" / Art New England, 1981

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

by Gary Garrels

Robert Rauschenberg recently was in Boston for the closing of the exhibition of his "Photems" at the Institute of Contemporary Art (September 15 - November 1) and for the opening of "Photos In + Out City Limits" at the Magnuson Lee Gallery (October 30 - December 12). The latter exhibition consists solely of photographs of Boston and is one of five exhibitions to open in the next few weeks of Rauschenberg's series of photographs of American cities, also including Charleston, South Carolina, Baltimore, Los Angeles, New York, and Sanibel Island, Florida. Because the photographs mark a new development in Rauschenberg's career, they have been met with great interest and scrutiny.

It was apparent from the outset of the following interview that a half hour of structured conversation between the artist and yet another reporter in yet another city was not the proper vehicle for pinning down in some decisive manner the issues and problems of the work. What does follow, however, sheds light on the artist's intent and method, and how, in particular, the photographs of Boston are related to the overall project. More analytical and general approaches to the recent photographs are given in already published work--"Another Side of Rauschenberg" by Andy Grundberg, The New York Times Sunday Magazine, October 18, 1981, and an interview by Alain Sayag, Director of Photography and Video at the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Robert Rauschenberg Photographs, Pantheon Books, 1981.

(by Gary Garrels at Magnuson Lee Gallery, Boston, October 29, 1981)

GG: In the interview in the book published this year in conjunction with your show of photographs at the Pompidou Centre, you said that when you're in a city you find that some of the best times and the greatest experiences were when you had a sense of being lost. I wondered if there was any applicability of that statement here. I wondered how familiar you were with Boston.

RR: I wasn't at all familiar with Boston. And I don't work with a plan. I was up here for a print show at the Magnuson Lee Gallery.

GG: That was last year?

RR: Yes. And I had already formulated the idea of "Photos In + Out City Limits." And I knew that I was going down to Tanya Grossman's at ULAE where I would pick up my '36 Phaeton Ford, and drive down the Coast, photographing the entire Coast, city by city, shot by shot.

GG: So you started here?

RR: I had had the idea for over six months or so, but Boston was the first city that I actually began the piece with. It's like being on location during an exhibition and that is a central part of the work--the feedback and the presentation which is my involvement with or actual interference with someone else's city. But that doesn't answer your question about being lost or not. I think what I meant by that statement is that familiarity--and this is a cliché--is a very serious form of blindness. In the photographs, the same scenes that one sees all the time are abstracted enough that you can not only see what's new about them, but you can, without committing any kind of crime, admit to yourself that you're not paying very much attention. I must say almost evangelistically

that I've always thought that it's a great waste not to be happy wherever you are.

GG: Was there anything special about Boston, any particularity of the city, that you found or that you sensed when you were working, that you wanted to convey in the photographs?

RR: I tried to stay as open-minded as possible. Just like I do when I'm painting. In fact, if I start having an idea, if I can read it in time, it's something to be gotten rid of. Because it's a formal restriction that I'm imposing which has to be based on outside values, which means it relates more to the past than it does to the actual minute. And so my job...and that's what the work is about, too ...is to have as few preconceptions and plans as possible and still work as hard. And it really gets exciting. I think even if you are familiar with a city, it's exciting. I noticed that in just a very short period of time a lot of these things that now are permanent images of the city have all changed. I used to be a little bit shy about asking Terry, my assistant, to stop the car if he was driving. He'd be driving, and we'd pass a situation and I'd think, "Was that good? Ah, I don't know. Maybe it wasn't that good." I missed a lot of things. But it's never the same again. Within five minutes that light moves over. It doesn't wait a second. And that gets very exciting. I started taking photographs...this is probably one of your questions....

GG: I'd rather hear what you wanted to talk about than what I wanted to talk about.

RR: Well, there was a period when I took a lot of photographs in the early '50s, well '49 and '48, too, when I studied at Black Mountain College.

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GG: You studied photography and painting there?

RR: I studied painting with Albers and photography with Hazel-Frieda Larsen. My first camera was a Rollei, and until then I'd had it all of my artistic life, which at that time was not as long as it would be if I still had it. And I loved that camera. It never let me down. It was just part of my hand, that's where that camera got to be. And somebody stole it. Ileana Sonnabend, who strangely enough was the first person to ever do a commercial venture with my photographs, gave me another camera, a better one. And I don't know why, but it just never worked for me. So I was almost relieved when somebody stole that one. So for a long time I just sort of quit taking pictures. I took a few for my work, when I needed a particular shot when I was doing the silkscreen pieces. I'd go out and ~~take~~^{take} Polaroids and stuff like that of the ugly side, you know, that you don't find in camera magazines. So I was taking occasional photographs, but it was only when the idea came up for a set for Trisha Brown's dance Glacial Decoy that I went hog wild. I had to have several thousand photographs, and then I had to build a set out of it. I became addicted. So I took all those photographs, and I couldn't stop. I rediscovered how marvelous it is to have an excuse just to look at everything. I mean any time of day. You can look at it five minutes later and it's something else. I think that this has increased my sensitivity to my painting, too. I'm in a period now when my biggest enemy would be taking advantage of my successfulness, which is not only

something that I should avoid, but I'm not sure that I can. I know how to play both sides, and I never start anything without feeling a monstrous kind of insecurity.

GG: So how did you start the project in Boston?

RR: We were staying across the street here from the gallery, and our reservation ended, and we had to leave. They had rented the room to somebody else. So we went to a hotel in Cambridge then, and that was responsible for another perspective. Walking and driving around there showed us another part of Boston. We took the Freedom Trail. And we wandered right and left off of that, and around the block, and down to the port.

~~GG: So you didn't know the city beforehand and you just wandered and looked?~~

~~RR: Yes.~~

GG: Did you find anything that grabbed your attention, that you kept coming back to or wanting to look at again?

RR: Not conspicuously.

GG: I imagine that after having taken photographs in Ft. Myers that Boston felt very different in texture and opened up a very different context for looking.

RR: Well, one thing about Boston is that...and I could tell this, but it doesn't have anything to do with the images, at least not in a one to one manner...is that I never felt quite as lost here as I have in some of the other places that I have tried to photograph. There was a sort of sympathetic feeling that I had the whole time. It has some of that same sort of mixture of activities and people that New York has, but it's a bit more relaxed, without that irritating and threatening edge. So I felt Boston was not as

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unfamiliar as most of the places that I've been. It's because of the variety, that non-mixing. It's not a blend. It's a series of individual, singular neighborhoods, people, activities, and interests, all in a small area.

GG: Did you find that there were physical qualities about Boston that were distinctive?

RR: I try not to do that. I try, like I said in the interview in the Pompidou Centre book, not to come to any conclusion, not to editorialize, moralize. The photographs are in no way an attempt to make any summation about the place. It's just a series of incidents that come from an unplanned trip. That's part of its liveliness. And as I said, it gets very exciting.

GG: How long did you work in the city taking photographs?

RR: I don't know for sure...about three or four days.

GG: Intensively?

RR: Yes. Every minute. At all different times of the day. Walking, driving, getting out and walking. You can't really see into the corners from a car.

GG: Andy Grundberg in his recent article about your work in The New York Sunday Times Magazine alluded to an all-inclusive Whitmanesque ambition in your work. Do you think of yourself in this Whitmanesque tradition?

RR: I don't know much about Whitman.

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RR:the local paper in Ft. Myers is The Islander, and I told this guy really he had.. he was doing it "I say, he says, I say, he says" and there's one point--I don't know what happened on the tape but it was just all wrong. And the fact was wrong. And he got so moralistic about saying that's what he heard on the tapes, and so therefore that's what it should be. And I said that's ridiculous, and finally Terry got on the phone and called him an asshole, and you just change that or we'll never give you another interview. And he still hasn't forgotten that. He still thinks somehow that I was cheating.

GG: My sense is that the interview--sometimes just in structuring it-- it makes one consider things in a different way, because it is a little bit more structured. But the main goal is to come up with something that elucidates or gives a better sense of the work, of what you're up to. And that's the only goal.

RR: Yeah. Sometimes by being forced to think in an area because of language, being forced to think in an area that I haven't put myself in yet discover something about the work that relates very strongly to future works. And so at the same time that I really dread interviews well, it's because, it's a performance. I'm always afraid that I'm not going to make it this time. Because it is a performance, and performances have a way of coming off or not coming off. In fact my nightmare last night was I was having, I was doing, a group of us were doing some kind of charity thing, and it was a dance event. And I was involved in it. And it was a rather spontaneous thing. The first night was successful. I didn't have a costume, so I used...I just performed in my shorts. And so, okay, it was very successful. So the next day, they wanted to do it again. I don't know--it was

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some very worthy cause. And so ...this wasn't such a good day. This is where it starts bending around, and so I not only didn't have any drawers, I had to borrow some. Freud would have fun with this. But I had to borrow some from my father. And my father's been dead for at least twenty years, so I guess that's why they had holes in them. But anyway, I go back stage, and there's a carnival that's just leaving--it's a public space--and so there's a lot of strange people, and I'm helping them pack, and I decide then that I have to have some...I can't perform in these shorts, because they're worn out. And so I go to Steve Paxton, and I ask him--who's a friend and a dancer, and he's in my piece. So is Trisha Brown and a few other people.

GG: I missed that, unfortunately, last week in New York.

RR: Oh, you shouldn't have.

GG: I know.

RR: It's too hard to get that much energy in one spot and hold it still long enough to get to see it. Anyway, I had to call the performance off, but Steve gave me something to wear, but I had to roll them up so that I wouldn't get them dirty. And then I decided that I couldn't possibly remember what I'd done--talking about performances and the fright. And I couldn't possibly remember what I'd done the night before. It was time to go on. And so I just came clean with the audience and said, "You know I don't want to embarrass myself, and I don't want to bore you, but the truth is I don't have the slightest idea what I'm doing." And so..... But you can have.....

I've given permission for other people in my dance to, in my performance to do any anything they want for you that they want to do. And that

woke myself up, and I said jeez, why don't you get some sleep!
(Laughter.) There you are. You're so close. You're laying in
bed, you know. But I bet you that was apprehension for interviews.

GG: Well this is just on tape. It's not on video.

RR: That's okay. You think that story would have on well for tomorrow's
tv. (Laughter.) If it's tv I could have shown them, you know.
These underpants.

GG: Right... not in Boston! (Laughter.)

RR: Well, it's sort of ridiculous to come to Boston and not be banned,
isn't it. Isn't that sort of wasting a good thing.

GG: It's those BB's--those double initials.

RR: Do they still do that? Is it still closed?

GG: Mmm. I don't think there's been anything banned in quite a while,
but I don't think there's been anything to ban, anything to raise
anybody's....

RR: There's not been any shocks come to town.

GG: (Pause.) Well, I have some questions about Boston. That's one of
the things that I'm sort of interested in. In the interview in the
new book, not the ULAE one but the one done for the Pompidou Centre,
you said that when you're in a city you find that some of the most...
the best times and the greatest experiences were when you had a sense
that you were lost, because then you're forced to look harder. And
I wondered if...how you approached photographing Boston, if there
was any applicability of that statement here. I wondered how familiar
were you with the city.

RR: I wasn't at all familiar with Boston. And I don't work with a plan. First I checked in over here, at the Ritz Carlton, and I was up here for a print show, that Betsy was having.

GG: That was last year.

RR: Yeah. And I had already formulated the idea of "In + Out: City Limits." And I knew that I was going down to Tanya Grossman's and pick up my '36 Phaeton Ford, and drive down the Coast, photographing the entire coast. And city by city, and you know, like shot by shot.

GG: So you started here?

RR: So I was here. So after having the idea, which I had had for over six months or so... Boston was the first city that I actually began the piece with. Also, I consider like being on location during the exhibition and the central part of the work. For the feedback and the presentation which is my involvement with or actual interference with someone else's city. And so I was thinking yesterday on the plane that I'm kind of like some kind of alien, you know, who comes in and tries to sell the city to the people it belongs to.

GG: Is there some sense then...

RR: But that doesn't answer your question about being lost or not. But I think what I meant by that statement is that familiarity... and that's cliché, but it's a very serious form of blindness. In the photographs the same scenes that one sees all the time are abstracted enough that you can not only see what's new about them, but you can without committing any kind of crime admit to yourself that you're not paying very much attention. I must say almost evangelistically there is a mild sickness involved, and that is that I've always thought

that it's a great waste not to be happy wherever you are.

GG: I agree with that one., although I'm sad..

RR: You're sad to say...(Laughter).

GG: That's something else I wondered about....was there anything special about Boston, any particularity of the city that you found or that you sensed when you were working, that you wanted to convey in the photographs?

RR: I tried to stay as open minded as possible. Just like I do when I'm painting. In fact, if I start having an idea, it's..if I can read it in time, it's something to be gotten rid of. Because it's a formal restriction that I'm imposing which is...has to be based on outside values, which means it relates more to the past than it does to the actual minute. And so my job...and that's what the work is about, too...but my job is to have as few preconceptions and plans as possible and still work as hard. And it really gets exciting. It's as exciting to me to do these photographs in a city that I'm unfamiliar with...and I think even if you are familiar with, like I noticed just in a very short period of time that a lot of these things that now are permanent images of the city have all changed. And Terry Van Brunt, my first assistant, ...I used to be a little bit shy about....I'd pass something. I'd be driving in the car and I'd pass something. He'd be driving, and we'd pass a situation, and I'd think " God, was that good?" You know. "Ah, I don't know. Maybe it wasn't that good." I missed a lot of stuff, you know. And he said. He's the one that told me that like..I'll catch it later. I'd say, "that was almost it, you know." And then I'd say...."Well,.."

He said, "you want me to turn around?" "Oh, don't bother." But that's a kind of shyness. Don't put somebody else out of their way. But it's never the same again. Within five minutes that light moves over, just... it doesn't wait for a second, and then that gets very exciting. Because if it's raining it's exciting. If it's cold it's exciting. If it's a sunny day it's exciting, you know. If it's nearly dark. I don't know. Actually I started taking.....this is probably one of your questions....but for a period there I didn't take....

GG: You just talk about whatever you.....

RR: Okay. I don't have to talk just about what you want me to talk about?!?
(Laughter.)

GG: I'd much rather you...

RR: We certainly got off to a good start, right? (Laughter.)

GG: I'd much rather hear what you wanted to talk about, rather than what I wanted to talk about. I know what I like to talk about. (Laughter.)
So.....Did you....

RR: Where were we?

GG: You were talking about the changes, like looking at the same thing.

RR: Yeah....there was a period when I took a lot of photographs in the early 50s, well, 49, 48, I studied at Black Mountain College, photography, and then.. .

GG: Did you study with Albers?

RR: I studied painting. Hazel (name?) Larson, yeah, there were two diametric. First, my camera that I got was a Rolly. And up 'til then, I'd had it all of my artistic life, which at that time was not as long as it would be if I still had it. And I loved that camera.

It never let me down. I didn't ever have to look at anything in it. I would just twist. It was just part of my hand. I mean, like you see a hammer, and you know what's it's for. Well, that's where that camera got to be. And....somebody stole it. And Ileana Sonnabend, strangely enough, was the first person to ever do a commercial venture with my photographs....she made a portfolio of some of the....I don't know...twelve photographs or something like that...that Betsy has here, or maybe she sold them...and anyway, she gave me another camera and she gave me a better one. And I don't know. I don't know if it would have worked if I would have had one that was just like the one I had, you know, or whether it was just that camera, but anyway it just never worked....I was almost relieved when somebody then stole that one. I felt bad enough, right. (Laughter.) So now I didn't have to worry about that, so for a long time I just sort of quit taking pictures. Until...well, I took a few for my work, when I needed a particular shot for like when I was in the silkscreen pieces, I'd go out and take Polaroids and stuff like that, of the ugly side, you know, that you don't find in camera magazines and things, a little bit more interesting than National Geographic, and....so I was taking occasional photographs, but then when the Trisha Brown thing came up of Glacial Decoy, I went hog wild, because of the restrictions of having to take something like, I don't know, several thousand photographs...I mean, not only do you have to select the image, but then I had to build a set out of it. And so then that cut down, that knocked out, that rid me of another five hundred photographs that wouldn't work, and so it was a really invigorating limitation. Being in one of the dullest towns in the world.

GG: Where was that?

RR: Ft. Myers, Florida. (Laughter.) And having to drive, every time you take photographs, you drive fifty miles before you get to anything, you know, and I mean you can just go so far with those cypress swamps, I mean if you're urbanized. And so I took all those photographs, and I couldn't stop. I used the word addiction. I was addicted again, and I rediscovered how marvelous it is to have an excuse just to look at everything. I mean any time of the day. I mean you can look at it five minutes later, and it's something else. And so I think that has to have increased my sensitivity to my painting, too. I'm in a period of time now that...my biggest enemy would be taking advantage of my successfulness, and it's not only something that I should avoid, but I'm not sure I can, you know, because I don't know when I'm playing...I know both sides of my tricks, you know. I play them, and I know how to ignore them, and I know how to disguise the trick. And it's very easy. I never start anything without feeling the monstrous kind of insecurity. And it's only natural to want to have a little peace, you know. (Laughter.) A big piece? Who wants a little piece of the big piece, huh? (Laughter.)

GG: So...when you started photographing Boston then you just wandered?

RR: Yes.

GG: You didn't really have a sense of...

RR: We were staying across the street here from the gallery. And then they threw us out, sort of, they rented the room to somebody else, or we stayed ten minutes longer than we were supposed to, or something.

Anyway, we were barely in there and we were out again. And , I don't know. There's always something going on in Boston, a medical convention or you know. So we went out to the Hyatt in Cambridge. So that was responsible for another perspective. And so walking around there or riding around there showed us another part of Boston. But we also took, what was it, that yellow line? the yellow line?

Terry: the green line.

GG: the green line, or the orange line, or the red line, or the blue line. There are four of them.

Terry: not the subway.

GG: not the subway.

Terry: the historical district.

GG: oh, the red....the Freedom Trail.

RR: Yep. We took the Freedom Trail. And then we wandered right and left off of that, and around the block, and down to the port and....

GG: You didn't know the city before, so you were just wandering and looking and it was very fresh.

RR: Yes.

GG: Did you find there was anything that grabbed your attention, that you kept coming back to or wanting to look at again?

RR: Not conspicuously.

GG: Did you find that after being in Ft. Myers that Boston had a you know, it has a whole different kind of context and texture...

RR: Well, one thing about Boston is that....I could tell this, but it doesn't have anything, it doesn't have much to do, not one for one imagewise, but I never felt quite as lost here as I have in some of

the other places that I have tried to photograph, because there was a sort of sympathetic feeling that I had the whole time. I wished some of the times that, when I was living in New York, that I had known enough about Boston to know that.....I don't know, I could be wrong. It could be part of my ignorance, but that I
* felt like I could have accomplished almost the same thing in Boston because of the mixtures of activities and of kinds of people that New York has, which makes New York....but maybe I could have been a bit more relaxed about it because it doesn't have that irritating, threatening edge. And yet you're very close to New York. There would be a lot of advantages that you could have of New York by being here. So, as I said, I felt Boston was not as unfamiliar as most of the places that I've been.

GG: Because it had some similar feeling....

RR: It's because of the variety, that non-mixing. It's not a blend. It's a series of individual, singular neighborhoods, people, activities, and interests, all in a small area.

GG: This won't appear on tape, but you couldn't have done in Boston anything you did in New York.

RR: (Laughter.)

GG: That's why I go down to New York a lot for precisely those reasons.

RR: You mean they clean the streets too well.

GG: A little bit, yeah.

RR: Noticeably I haven't seen any two city blocks that I could furnish a loft with yet for nothing. And that's true in New York. That's a real advantage for the artist. You might pick up a few extra bugs

but the place you have already has them anyway. (Laughter.)

Robert Kaufmann: You have a lot of artists around the outside of the city. It's not that far, like in New York. You can still be in Cambridge, or Somerville and be part of the community.

RR: Uh, huh.

RK: So there are a lot of artists that live there.

GG: It'd sort of be sort of like living over in Hoboken, you can still get in..... Did you find that there were physical qualities about the city, of Boston, that...

RR: I try not to do that. I trylike I said in that book, I try not to come to any conclusion, editorialize, moralize. The photographs are in no way an attempt to make any summation about the place. It's just a series of incidents that come from an unplanned trip. That's part of its liveliness.

GG: So you're a great believer in serendipity, surprise.

RR: I never knew what serendipity meant.

GG: It's when you come upon something that you weren't expecting. They use it a lot in relation to scientific experiments. It's when you're doing an experiment for one purpose, but you end up finding out something totally unforeseen, that you weren't looking for.

RR: Uh. huh. It's easier to be right about that all the time then if you're not looking for anything.

GG: Right.

RR: (Laughter.)

Robert Kaufmann: I call that hunting myself. You're searching,
you don't know what it is, but you know it's out there.

RR: Yeah. It gets very exciting, too, like I just turned the corner.
You can ask Terry. Sometimes I get so excited that I can't hold
the camera still. It's ridiculous. Terry punches me, and says
let your breath out, let your breath out. (Laughter.)

GG: How long did you work here in the city taking photographs.

RR: I don't know...about three or four days.

GG: Very intensively.

RR: Yep. Every minutes, just walking.

GG: All different times of day.

Terry: And driving.

RR: Yep. Or drive to a place and get out and walk. You can't really
see into the corners from a car.

GG: Boston is a very congenial city for walking. I think that's one
of its strong points.

RR: What are we starting, an exercise class.? (Laughter.)

They call that moonlighting? (Laughter.)

Robert Kaufmann: I have a question, when I got the invitation, I saw
a couple of the pictures were laid on top of each other, and I
was very surprised to see that you weren't doing that in the pictures.

RR: That's the Photems. That's the ICA.

RK: But it's one of the same pictures.

RR: Yeah.

GG: Its the one with the light in the window.

RK: Oh, I see, so that's a separate piece. ...It was the statue and
and another one below it.

RR: Oh, from the poster. Oh, right. I did two photographs for that.
I was worried about the comparison of the Photems, which is a
whole other attitude.I had two things which could be
misunderstood. One, I could pick a photograph from the group
and then that one would be overwhelmingly out of proportion, like,
"oh, that must be the best one." And I try to fight that as much
as I can, you know. I mean "that's the one he likes the best."
And that would just be all over the place, because there's a good
paper edition and now all the other places I'm having "In + Out:
City Limits" shows are selling the posters from the other places.
So I thought, well, okay, it is a poster, so the image should be
large enough to be read across the room, so at its maximum. When
that's going to happen, I'll have two photographs, and then after
I did that, uh oh, it's going to look like Photems again maybe.
You're always in a little trouble. The perfect decisions are for
somebody else. (Laughter.) I use recovery from mistakes as a
positive, creative source.

RK: Well, it's just that that implied so much more of a tampering with
the image, and these are much more of a pure image, that that's
why I was questioning it, if that was part of your work, or if they
had done that without your knowledge.

RR: No, but you can see what my problem was about like establishing a
single photograph, like you know, the Ansel Adams...that's not

that's certainly not his best photograph.

GG: I had another whole different sort of question, but I find it interesting, because it sparks something for me, which was from Andy Grundberg's article in the Times last week, or the week before, or whenever. He alluded to an all-inclusive Whitmanesque ambition in your work. Do you remember that phrase?

(Flipping the tape to side two.)

RR: People write about you, and after about the third article you think, "Oh, I can't read this. I can't read this." And then you say, "Not an opening. I hate openings." (Laughter.) Ten minutes after you get into a gallery finally that you've been working for your whole life, right, and then you don't want to go to the opening. (Laughter.)

Robert Kaufmann: Well, you're in every publication I get. All of a sudden, you're everywhere.

RR: And I'm not having any special shows. I mean when I was having the Smithsonian show, the retrospective which was the first and biggest show that this country's ever had, you know, there'd be a little, small article in the local newspaper.

GG: Well, I think the mood is changing, and I think there's going to be a new appreciation for your work.

RR: Really?

GG: I think so.

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Robert Kaufmann: Well, you stepped into a big arena with photography.

RR: I think I had my best foot forward with it, too, because I was scared to start showing the photographs, because that's a very serious world there. In photography nearly everyone knows what's right. Well, I had good training, as far as, like, being right might be. At Black Mountain, from the very beginning it was whole frame. No cropping. No fiddling around with it. You get it right on there, and that's the way I like to work. I like to fiddle around until I get the contrast that says the most for that particular image. Because doing a photograph has a lot more variables than doing any painting might have. I mean I paint I with my eyes closed, but there's nothing like working in the dark. (Laughter.)

GG: Do you ever think of yourself in this Whitmanesque tradition?

RR: I don't know that much about Whitman, except about Bob Whitman, who we were talking about earlier.

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RR: From the time I did the Boston show, I can that the last shots I took for "In + Out: City Limits" were in Charleston, and all of a sudden in Charleston I started adding people in the pictures. And when I was up here, I don't know what the season was or what, I kept kind of waiting for everybody....like the birds to get to where they were going to be....This is a picture, now you settle down now. Then there's a difference a year later in the attitude

toward the amount of activity that I will allow but without being candid. I hate candid photography. I don't like violating the privacy of a situation. And unless it looks absolutely classic, I mean if they're misbehaving and looking classic, I can't help it.

12 November 1981

Dear Bob,

As promised, here is a copy of the transcribed interview we did, as well as a copy of the edited version. The editor of Art New England just called me to say she will print it in its entirety. By the way, no one else will see the unedited copy; I thought you might enjoy having it especially for the dream.

Perhaps I will see you in New York at your opening in January. It was a great pleasure to meet you and to have the chance to talk - both before and after the tape recorder!

Sincerely,
 Gary Garrels

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An Interview With Robert Rauschenberg

by Gary Garrels



Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg

Photo - Robert Kaufman

Robert Rauschenberg was in Boston recently for the closing of the exhibition of his *Photems* at the Institute of Contemporary Art and for the opening of *Photos In + Out City Limits* at the Magnuson Lee Gallery. The latter exhibition consists solely of photographs of Boston and is one of five current exhibitions of Rauschenberg's series of photographs of American cities, including Charleston, South Carolina, Baltimore, Los Angeles, New York, and Sanibel Island, Florida, as well as Boston. Because the photographs mark a new development in Rauschenberg's career, they have been met with great interest and scrutiny.

Gary Garrels: In the interview in the book published this year in conjunction with your show of photographs at the Pompidou Centre, you said that when you're in a city you find that some of the best times and the greatest experiences were when you had a sense of being lost. I wondered if there was any applicability of that statement here. I wondered how familiar you were with Boston.

Robert Rauschenberg: I wasn't at all familiar with Boston. And I don't work with a plan. I was up here for a print show at the Magnuson Lee Gallery.

GG: That was last year?

RR: Yes. And I had already formulated the idea of *Photos In + Out City Limits*. And I knew that I was going down to Tanya Grossman's at ULAE where I would pick up my '36 Phaeton Ford and drive down the coast, photographing the entire coast, city by city, shot by shot.

GG: So you started here?

RR: I had had the idea for over six months or so, but Boston was the first city that I actually began the piece with. It's like being on location during an exhibition, and that is a central part of the work—the feedback and the presentation which is my involvement with or actual interference with someone else's city. But that doesn't answer your question about being lost or not. I think what I meant by that statement is that familiarity—and this is a cliché—is a very serious form of blindness. In the photographs, the same scenes that one sees all the time are abstracted enough that you can not only see what's new about them but you can, without committing any kind of crime, admit to yourself that you're not paying very much attention. I must say almost evangelistically that I've always thought that it's a great waste not to be happy wherever you are.

GG: Was there anything special about Boston, any particularity of the city, that you found or that you sensed when you were working, that you wanted to convey in the photographs?

RR: I tried to stay as open-minded as possible. Just like I do when I'm painting. In fact, if I start having an idea, if I can read it in time, it's something to be gotten rid of, because it's a formal restriction that I'm imposing which has to be based on outside values, which means it relates more to the past than it does to the actual minute. And so my job—and that's what the work is about, too—is to have as few preconceptions and plans as possible and still work as hard. And it really gets exciting. I think even if you are familiar with a city, it's exciting. I noticed that in just a very short period of time a lot of these things that now are permanent images of the city have all changed. I used to be a little bit shy about asking Terry, my assistant, to stop the car if he was driving. He'd be driving, and we'd pass a situation and I'd think, "Was that good? Ah, I don't know. Maybe it wasn't that good." I missed a lot of things. But it's never the same again. Within five minutes that light moves over. It doesn't wait a second. And that gets very exciting. I started taking photographs—this is probably one of your questions...

GG: I'd rather hear what you wanted to talk about than what I wanted to talk about.

RR: Well, there was a period when I took a lot of

photographs in the early fifties, well, '49 and '48, too, when I studied at Black Mountain College.

GG: You studied photography and painting there?

RR: I studied painting with Albers and photography with Hazel Frieda Larsen. My first camera was a Rolleiflex, and until then I'd had it all of my artistic life, which at that time was not as long as it would be if I still had it. And I loved that camera. It never let me down. It was just part of my hand, that's where that camera got to be. And somebody stole it. Ileana Sonnabend, who strangely enough was the first person to ever do a commercial venture with my photographs, gave me another camera, a better one. And I don't know why, but it just never worked for me. So I was almost relieved when somebody stole that one. So for a long time I just sort of quit taking pictures. I took a few for my work, when I needed a particular shot when I was doing the silkscreen pieces. I'd go out and take Polaroids and stuff like that of the ugly side, you know, that you don't find in camera magazines. So I was taking occasional photographs, but it was only when the idea came up for a set for Trisha Brown's dance *Glacial Decoy* that I went hog wild. I had to have several thousand photographs, and then I had to build a set out of it. I became addicted. So I took all those photographs and I couldn't stop. I rediscovered how marvelous it is to have an excuse just to look at everything. I mean any time of day. You can look at it five minutes later, and it's something else. I think that this has increased my sensitivity to my painting, too. I'm in a period now when my biggest enemy would be taking advantage of my successfulness, which is not only something that I should avoid but I'm not sure that I can. I know how to play both sides, and I never start anything without feeling a monstrous kind of insecurity.

GG: So how did you start the project in Boston?

RR: We were staying across the street here from the gallery, and our reservation ended, and we had to leave. They had rented the room to somebody else. So we went to a hotel in Cambridge then, and that was responsible for another perspective. Walking and driving around there showed us another part of Boston. We took the Freedom Trail, and we wandered right and left off of that, and around the block, and down to the port.

GG: Did you find anything that grabbed your attention, that you kept coming back to or wanting to look at again?

RR: Not conspicuously.

GG: I imagine that after having taken photographs in Fort Myers, Boston felt very different in texture and opened up a very different context for looking.

RR: Well, one thing about Boston is that—and I could tell this, but it doesn't have anything to do with the images, at least not in a one-to-one manner—is that I never felt quite as lost here as I have in some of the other places that I have tried to photograph. There was a sort of sympathetic feeling that I had the whole time. It has some of that same sort of mixture of activities and people that New York has, but it's a bit more relaxed, without that irritating and threatening edge. So I felt Boston was not as unfamiliar as most of the places that I've been. It's because of the variety, that nonmixing. It's not a blend. It's a series of individual, singular neighborhoods, people, activities, and interests, all in a small area.

GG: Did you find that there were physical qualities about Boston that were distinctive?

RR: I try not to do that. I try, like I said in the interview in the Pompidou Centre book [*Robert Rauschenberg Photographs*, Pantheon Books, 1981], not to come to any conclusion, not to editorialize, moralize. The photographs are in no way an attempt to make any summation about the place. It's just a series of incidents that come from an unplanned trip. That's part of its liveliness. And as I said, it gets very exciting.



Photo © Robert Kaufman

Detail

Previously published works concerning Rauschenberg's photographs include "Another Side of Rauschenberg" by Andy Grundberg, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, October 18, 1981, and an interview by Alain Sayag, Director of Photography and Video at the Centre Georges Pompidou.

Garry Garrels is a member of the Hayden Gallery staff at MIT and a freelance art critic.