

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Mancusi-Ungaro, Carol; Hopps, Walter; Rauschenberg, Robert /
Group Discussion / Rice Museum, 1985

CMU: Today is December 21, 1985. Bob Rauschenberg is in Texas and has come to the Rice Museum to discuss his paintings.

Cut to Walter discussing in conservation lab Rachel Rosenthal with CMU, Linda Cathcart, Marti Mayo, Neil Printz, David White & Terry Van Brun

WH: Rachel, having set up Instant Theatre, heavy with props and blackout techniques spontaneously emitted because they're only two minutes long. And some were even narrative where people change on stage.

LC: Music Walter?

WH: Yeah, some had music.

David White: She's into animals now.

WH: Yeah, she's fantastic, a whole new generation has rediscovered her. And she's gone on in performance art.

LC: How old is she now?

WH: I'd say she's between 55 and 60. One of the really good things as opposed to lots of so-so things about the Automobile and Culture show is that she did a ballet with cars. She got stunt drivers to do wheelies, they would go around slow on two wheels in big muscle cars (?). She (verb) on a tower, a scaffolding tower, in the center, in this big parking lot. She's in her kind of combat, commando, green beret.

Terry V.B.: Is that her uniform that she's wearing?

WH: Yeah, she's pretty much into this heavy massive macho thing, the boots knives, c.b. and all, kinda like the tough commando drill sergeant with a bullhorn and her wonderful voice which is not all that macho. Directing the choreography of these stunt drivers in their cars.

LC: So people sat in bleachers or what?

WH: Sat in bleachers. Animals -- she's devoted to -- she's way beyond the anti-vivisectionists, I mean she's into animalism as in sexism.

WH: She's had amazing performances with little animals.

Neil Printz: Her rat, her pet rat

WH: What is the name of the rat?

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Neil Printz.: Di-be-01.

WH: She's the real McCoy.

LC: And, she was Jasper's lover.

WH: Let's not bring it up today. Jasper and her were very close.
People like Chris Burden and Barbara Smith, she was sort of their secret.

Lengthy dialogue between David White and Linda Cathcart.

Rauschenberg arrives, and the work is looked at in the front of the museum.
With all the people present: Walter Hopps, Robert Rauschenberg, Marti Mayo, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Linda Cathcart, 2 assistants of Robert Rauschenberg, one named David White, Neil Printz, Terry Van Brunt, ..
Tape begins with BR discussing the painting, Crucifixion and Reflection.
Laughter.

Discussing the correct hanging of C & F.

Male voice: Well, the cross is supposed to be..

BR: They were using this... this line as a horizon.

Well, that signature is probably leftover from the painting that's underneath.

CMU: What is the painting that's underneath?

BR: That's your job!

Laughter.

BR: I made that mistake once. I made that mistake in the.. you know, the big black enamel piece. Well, it used to have one more panel. And one day I was just feeling a little bit, I don't know, pompous, I guess, and I thought you know, maybe one of those paintings had, cause you know I just had to use the same material over and over. That maybe I painted out something that's really good and, you know, this painting here has already got five panels, and you know, so they wouldn't miss one.

I think I'll just check on that -- it's the worst painting I have ever seen. It was really awful so I -- I don't look underneath anymore.

I still paint over sometimes but I don't look underneath.

Group moves on to the next work, Night Blooming Series. Faint dialogue by Walter about original strip frame.

WH: We look at it (painting) without this (frame).

BR: Without it.

WH: Without it. We'd love to show it without it.

BR: Show it (painting) without it (frame). Did you see what was underneath?

WH: Yeah, a painted edge. But it looks like it was once painted over with extra black paint that shows on the frame (This is the dist of the point)

BR: I don't think so.

WH: When you did these, Bob, some of the _____ some things in Betty's (Parson's) show.

BR: This black mat? and there's a whole series of Night Blooming things which were somehow related to like roots and blossoms and fruits and..

WH: So these are the blacks that come to us before _____?

BR: Right.

Neil Frintz: What's it say back there? (someone looking on reverse of painting).

BR: Why do they keep looking this gift horse in the mouth?

Laughter.

BR: I told you don't look underneath.

WH: Turn it around, there's a big signature that I wonder if it's yours.

WH: It's been relined.

BR: Uh-huh. No, that's not mine.

I've had some that, that, that, that because I was married at this time, and Sue was painting too. - that's my ex-wife. And you know, and we

just, I don't know, we were just really happy people. And you know, if I'd get up in the morning and I started working and there wasn't anything to work on, you know, I'd paint over one of her pieces or, if she got up before I did, she'd paint over one of my pieces.

WH: Where was that?

BR: We had Weil-Rauschenbergs or Rauschenberg-Weil.

BR: Uh, maybe in Chicago in 'a .. what's his name garage, Aaron Siskind drove them there and who's that guy in Chicago that was a good friend of Aaron's, they had a gallery.

LC: Bud Holland?

NP: In a garage, you say.

WH: Aaron Siskind's garage was on the south side.

mumble....mumble.... Allen Frumkin.

BR: He (Allen) showed that ... who's that sculptor who makes those little houses and stuff?

WH: Westermann.

BR: Well, Aaron drove Twombly and Rauschenberg there

BR: And... I don't think they were ever shown there...Because it's..

WH: Cy Twombly gives it a credit. Cy gives it a credit.

BR: But does it say in his garage?

WH: It's in a gallery I've never heard of (Seven Stairs Gallery)

BR: Oh, O.K.

It's one of those Noah Goldowsky.. anyway, they.. mine, anyway, never made it past the garage and then they didn't show up on the market for a.. you know, I don't know, thirty years later.

WH: Were they in Aaron's hands?

BR: Yeah, but I mean you know how we do deals.

He's going to Chicago and he's got a friend who's got a gallery and you're an unknown artist, you know, what are you going to say? I felt

lucky that we didn't have to pay for the gasoline! This is a big deal.
BR: Cy's big break was when Motherwell selected him for the Kootz show, the new talent thing where each artist that was in the gallery already, which was Gottlieb, Motherwell, and Hans Hofmann and Baziotes, and they each got to pick a new bright young star.

Rauschenberg and others move on to Bass painting (Composition 1951)

WH: Carol's been working on this, what kind of paper would this be... tissue paper.

BR: Tissue, it's too wide.

Terry V.E.: It's 26 years old, not bad.

CMU: How's the tonality in general with the color?

WH: Sorta feels o.k.?

BR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean this, there's nothing you can do about that, that wasn't that color then, but I.. what can you do?

CMU: You mean the whiting, the tone of the colors?

BR: Yeah, well it's in good shape.

WH: Was the mirror all shiny new?

BR: No, I had a little trouble with that. It's what happens with the glue

Terry V.E.: What kind of material is this? Muslin (looking at the edge of canvas)

CMU: You mean the fabric...

Terry V.E.: Yeah.

CMU: No, I think it's linen. It looks like a really fine linen.

WS: It looks like you painted with latex, is that latex there?

BR: I used house paint, enamel, unlabeled, no this is before the unlabeled paint, the real bargains on Canal Street where they, you buy the can, the excitement, where you can't wait to get home, you paid a nickel for a gallon of paint, you know. Because nobody knew what color was inside. You know, you ran all the way home to see what you just bought!

I don't know which was the most fun, the fact that you saved so much money, which you didn't have anyway, that's not a lot of fun,

or just discovering what the color. But then I made another morality about it, I mean, you know, those days you had to entertain yourself, and so you made up house rules about painting and that was that I had to use every color that I bought whether I hated it or not.

Terry V.E. : What was the worst one (color)?

BR: It's called the economy of survival. The worst one I remember, it was not a khaki but it's more a cocky paint or a waterproofing for convertible tops. Now when you want to ask me my favorite one, it's the excess traffic yellow which dried thick and beautiful and cracked gorgeously and it's like the , like they use in the streets, and I mean they still use that -- it's still a gorgeous one.

Terry V.E. : How did you do these circles, Bob?

BR: Oh, that's a thingy that's underneath, it looks like one of Sue's.

CMU: It's actually in remarkably good condition.

BR: It is, isn't it? You have to also remember that, that these things were not taken care of for an awfully long time..

CMU: What about the newspaper turning so dark and brown, does it interfere with your original balance of it?

BR: I don't mind things looking like the time in which they were done, I mean.. Picasso collages and things like that, that in some cases he went and bought antique newspapers in order to have that color.

CMU: In terms of the tissue paper in the way it's lifting off in areas ... is that something we should go with or set down completely?

BR: I think so.

WH: So you can still see that it is tissue paper.

BR: Right.

CMU: But be more intact. There are places where I can see that the surface dirt is just collected on the raised surface where you would expect and think that it accentuates the form underneath more because the dirt has collected there.

BR: That can be cleaned.

CMU: I was inclined to minimize that in a way so it wouldn't be so apparent. But it is actually in tonality very much in keeping with Crucifixion and Reflection.

LC: What's the name of this one?

CMU: We just have it as Composition.

WH: Somebody stuck the name Composition in there. I don't think it's your title, Bob.

BF: I don't think so. It would be inappropriate actually. It still remains inappropriate after all these years. It would still be a lie. I mean, I'm doing the quarter of a mile to destroy any concept of composition as being a possible part of art.

Isn't it funny, composition has to be one of the dumbest things that anybody has ever thought of.

WH: When did that word first come up?

NP: I think it was in the sixties.

BR: I'm sure Betty Parsons knew better. She would have never said that.

NP: Was this at Betty Parsons'?

BR: Uh- huh.

NP: It was in the same show.

BR: Yeah.. the . most of the colors were there's some and I, I don't know, I can see them show up, but there's a like a drawing will read, I don't know, I was on this religious kick or something. Like this is probably an athiest idea of the Torah or something, you know.

WH: When you put Betty's show together.. as the work comes in and you made the sort of selection on the wall, are there some paintings brought in that end up in the racks?

BR: Well, that, that one was in her racks, oh, no, I don't think so, I don't know.

WH: Everything got on the wall.

BR: Yeah, I think so, yeah

WH: Then after the show a few things sit in racks for awhile.

BR: Oh, she kept a couple, she kept a black one, she kept a white one, both ended up in Crispo's hands.

NP: Were there any black ones in the show?

BR: Uh-huh.

NP: When you read the reviews they always talk about the white ones, it's sort of the thing you think of.

BR: But most of the color that was used was mirror, newspapers and whites and, I think the one that I call Eden, which is like a bunch of little lollipops or something and one was ^{red} ~~read~~, a real serious idea (laughter) no, it's just one of the little lollipop figures was red.

WH: But there was a painting in that show that was black all over.

BR: Uh-huh, and that, I don't know, was the other one that somehow came through Sari Dienes through Crispo. But that one had already been sold.

WH: After Betty's show. (something about, did he show work at any other time at Betty Parsons').

BR: Ahhh, my last appearance there was with the a... When I was very excited at Black Mountain doing all Whites and all Blacks, and I wrote her a very romantic letter about those and, a, unfortunately while I was there I drove them to New York, and while I was showing them to her, both Ad Reinhardt drops into the gallery and Barney Newman and they are with Alexander Lieberman, and so it wasn't more than a week that I knew I was

out of the gallery (laughter) -- couldn't have timed it better. I drove all the way from Black Mountain straight ahead, filled with the gorgeous naive excitement that we used to have so much of.

WH: Newman tried to make up for it.

BR: Oh, yeah, oh, yes. He gave me his wife (laughter). Which more than made up for any work. She wasn't rich then. The best she could do was dance all night. She did carry tuna fish sandwiches in her pocket, though, for late snacks.

LC: Reinhardt didn't have anything like that to offer.

BR: No, but he gave me a gorgeous compliment once, though, and it was a, I didn't know, it was before that, and I just had this show. And he said some like a.. I met him near Carnegie Hall, he had a studio around there, and he said, you're Rauschenberg, aren't you? And I guess it's almost the first time anybody recognized me as being a painter, I mean on the street or something, and I said, Yeah, I knew who he was, of course, and he said, you know, your last show was very good, and fortunately he added, before I could make a real ass of myself, and say thank you, he said, "Isn't that too bad that one just gets better." (Laughter) Well, he was, he was an absolute expert on negative thinking.

I mean, he couldn't do it. I mean he thought that all of his works were monuments to total negation of art. When he wrote about them, no form, no composition, no color.

WH: No content.

BR: And they were full of all those lies, and you know, I mean like his paintings in the first place were too fancy, you know, there was too much of all of that, I mean, how many kinds of red panels do you have to make to not have any composition... how many browns do you have to add to the black paint? If you want black, I'll show you black. (Laughter)

BR: I guess we have to go.

Group: Thank you.

BR: Oh, thank you, for the sermonette, too. That's the first time
I've spent this much time with you without a drink (talking to Walter).