

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Rose, Barbara / Personal Interview, 1987

Monday
4/13/87

Dear Bob,

Here's the transcript
of the interview we did
for the film on the
Sixties for your files.

Also a catalogue
inscribed to you from
a friend in Houston
inspired by you to
deal with her experience
in Auschwitz in a
positive way — if that's possible

I loved seeing
you and I love you

P.S. Good ~~time~~ ^{bye} + good luck in Naples!

feh, The cardboard pieces are paintings.

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(In what way)



Q I have some sculptures that I'm working on called In Captive.

they're just like stacks of boxes but I'm involved in
shadows so with that and ^{wires} wires and no bulbs I get colored

shadows that just change like the day. The pieces look
about as simple_^ minded as anything could possibly be. If
it was anymore simple-minded it couldn't be done.

(Do you transform the boxes?)

A What these sculptures look like is that they're¹ something
very ^{dumb} down is in front of something very interesting that
you find if you move what's very dumb away from it, you
don't have anything.

They're softer. Cardboard things. I think what attracted me
to the cardboard thing was after fighting use of the evadable

~~(do you have an idea in mind to begin with?)~~

I never have any idea to begin with. It just works.

I really just like working, just making things. That's the most important thing.

~~(How do you know when it's done?)~~

~~I knew it was done when I finished.~~

~~You've seen nothing.~~

~~While they're being made which I love, and so by the time you've done all this dumb work then you see it for the firsttime yourself before anybody else does.~~

~~(The cardboard?)~~

~~(Do you think cardboard has properties as a material?)~~

Material is material, but I was relly turned toward cardboard because of its yielding quality. I don't have to be strong to use it.

¶ All material has history. All material has its own history

built into it. There's not better material. It's just as

unnatural for people to use oil paint as it is to use

anything else. An artist manufactures his material out of

his own existence and his own either ignorance or familiarity

or confidence.

Rauschenberg #3

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~~(When did you decide to be an artist?)~~

I never decided to be an artist. I grew up in Port Arthur, Texas and there weren't any artists. No one knew what an artist was. It wasn't until I got out of the Navy ~~that.....~~ In the Navy I saw my first oil painting, and then I knew that something was going on. I always drew a lot, I don't remember the year in which I decided to be an artist but it was shortly after knowing that you could be an artist.

~~(When did you meet John Cage?)~~

I met John Cage at Black Mountain College and I think that was probably in '49 or '50.

~~(Did he have an influence on your work?)~~

John Cage had a fantastic influence on my thinking.

He simply gave me permission to go on thinking and he
 was the ^{only} one who gave me permission to go ^{on} thinking
 the way I was thinking.

(How was that?)

Well it ^{changed}. From one thought to another I would always
 think well maybe now I'm going to ^{lose} John's interest,
 but that's a necessary risk, You have to trust yourself more
 than anybody else or any relationship that you have.

(Why ^{did} you go to Blackmountain?)

(What was it like?)

I went to Blackmountain because I was very much in love with
 Sue Cushenbaum now, and I needed disci-
 pline and Albers there was an article in Time Magazine
 about Albers was the world's greatest disciplinarian.
 I could have gone on I think just painting with my hands
 and doing a mess forever, because I really loved painting

~~but I knew that would only force me to buy a new pair~~
~~of pants.~~

~~(Was Albers a great disciplinarian?)~~

Albers is I think a fantastic teacher, but he only taught
me more respect for things I ~~all~~ ready felt than he had.

~~(What was taught at Blackmountain? what did you learn~~

~~there?)~~

~~Watercolor class at Blackmountain was the~~ No, actually
leaf studies was my biggest problem. I couldn't understand
why you would use leaves ~~and their~~ natural colors to make them
to play ~~tho~~ off one against the other, and that was the same
problem I had with color. One color isn't used to make
another color with something else or itself. So fuck theory.

~~(Was the atmosphere at Blackmountain discipline?)~~

~~(What was the atmosphere like?)~~

It was an atmosphere at Blackmountain College which was in every situation except the painting or in the arts was about freedom. In the arts it was about discipline and control, and control of control.

~~(Was it related to the Bauhaus?)~~

It was almost a policing going on at Blackmountain College in the arts. Albers kept a master key, but Sue and I had ^{one} key. I was the garbage man in Blackmountain College because I liked to drive trucks, so we had a studio a second studio that wasn't registered where I would go through everybody's closet and take out the things that we would like to have, and he found out that that was ours and he would go through the studio. It was just like the police and make searches to see whether you were working or not or if you were working what you were doing and anything that wasn't a class project was subversive. Now I don't know

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if that's Bauhaus or not.

~~(Did you rebel against this? Why were you so interested in the garbage?)~~

A I think I was so interested in the garbage because

it was a touch of humanity within that. I've always ~~been~~
at

balked at education. There's something the moment something
though

appears as if it's something you ought to know. I automati-

cally think I can do without it because it's just going to

interfere with learning some thing else. I think each person

is their own adventure and it can't be programmed. It

can't be right. It can't be wrong.

~~(Was growing up in the Southwest important to you?)~~

A I grew up someplace that I would never think of living

in there again and even my family moved away.

A I think maybe coming out of really being real white trash

authentically gave me a sense of absolutely no

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fear of any other category.

~~(Was the fact that you're part Indian ever interesting
to you?)~~

I'm a quarter Cherokee, which really isn't very interesting
to the Church of Christ ministers that put our family tree
together.

I think people here in the United States, or maybe not, I'm
not sure, but some do have a sense of if you're really
urban, suburban, if you're really if you have
nothing you've got to touch things a lot and my pleasure
and feeling something with a hand. I think my hands think
and my head in a stomach.

~~(Do you think there's some reason for the revival of
American Indian art now?)~~

~~(Why are you so concerned with what's going on? Why do you keep getting involved?)~~

Q I think this comes out of, we were talking about the Indian thing before and there is ^a new focus there. They didn't live here ^{as} an enemy to the world. They were left things very much the way they were to conting^u and it's perfectly clear that we can't continue the way we're going and have either sane people or a planet, and I think we're going to get insane people before we loose the planet.

~~(When did you first start using real objects?)~~

Q I started using real objects in my work from the very ^{first.} forst

I remember in the Navy, I painted a picture of somebody

and I didn't know about painting yet and I used ^{blood} ~~blood~~ fr

for the red. from me.

~~(Why did you use real objects?)~~

It must be something between real objects and unreal objects.
Unreal objects are ideas that people have and real objects
are things that are around one.

~~(Did you know about collage? or about Dada found objects?~~
~~or about Schwitters' work? when you started?)~~

~~I remember I had done lots of collages and one day.~~

Well there were two situations, one was that I was in
the museum one day and then I was in there another day.

One day that I was in there I saw a collage that Picasso had
done in 1924 which was one year before I was born and I
didn't know about collages, and I thought—oh how can you
do it?

Another one is I saw Marcel Duchamp's stool with the
bicycle wheel and I thought ~~oh~~ that's the most fantastic
piece of sculpture that I've ever seen and it was shown
with some ~~Maillol~~ Maillol. Then I found out that it was Dada,
that it was protest. And protest against what? There was

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a beautiful object, there all ready made. So I never really understood Dada, but I found out very shortly about collage because everybody asked me a lot about Schwitters so I had to find out something about Schwitters.

One of the best things I like about Schwitters is that Volpe who had done theatre work I think it's in the Bauhaus, with Volpe as a composer and Schwitters wrote this piece. Volpe wrote the music. Schwitters did the piece where the tenor rides around on a bicycle. I would really love to see that still.

~~(Were you doing the collages before you saw Schwitters'~~

~~work?)~~

A I started with collage without ever knowing even the word collage.

~~(Why did you start having objects project from your canvas?)~~

One of the first things I did in the first collages, was to include

mirrors & which would suck the room or whatever was going on into the piece and then I went ~~A~~ to light bulbs where the painting would also be responsible for its own light.

In addition to what happened around it and then the nature of some of the materials I worked with got so impossible ~~to~~ to just ~~to~~ physically figure out how they could be supported on the wall that it was obvious that they had no business hanging flatly on the wall, and that 's the beginning of the Combines . It also gave me another surface to work on. So it was even economical.

~~(What was the first Combine?)~~

I I guess the Bed could be considered the first combine except that it isn't really because it isn't really a combine. I was doing sculptures. I tied rocks together and I hung sheets of paper one after another on a rack like out to dry but the combines where the painting just got so heavy

that I had to call it something else. I think it was
that one that Panza has with the chicken ^{and} mirrors
and then shoes in them.

Odalewue

~~Odalewue~~ may be the first one, and that started with

my trying to find a wedding cake and it ended up being a
pillow which had the same sort of sensual quality of something
standing alone like in something so tender.

~~(Did you have anything in mind when you did Bed?)~~

When I did the Bed I just literally ran out of things
to paint on and there was this quilt and it was somewhere and
I didn't need that so I thought it's good because I'd been
working on flat surfaces ~~wt~~ and covering them because
I was into color then I was covering them with funny
papers. So that anything that I would do by hand
would be just in addition to what was going on ~~instead of~~

Rauschenberg #4

~~(Does accident or chance play a large role in your work?)~~

I don't believe ~~in either accident or chance.~~

Man has built ~~in with~~ if he's with himself he has a continuity

and so that to self consciously to define accident and

and chance is only rational and I don't find the rational

side of any thought ~~is well-meaning.~~

I come to terms with my materials. They know and I know

that we're going to try something, and sometimes it works

sometimes it doesn't but I would substitute anything for

preconceptions or deliberateness. If that moment can't be as

fresh and as strange and as unpredictable as what's going

on all around you then it's false.

I erased the de Kooning drawing ~~not~~ out of any negative

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response. I was working then I was doing all white paintings and all black at the same time. And I love to draw

so I was doing erasure drawings. It just didn't make any sense for me to erase my own marks, so I saw thought

well this is a special situation. You're trying to make art to so you've got to erase art and de Kooning was the most important artist that day. So the piece actually

began when I knocked on his door and said I'd like to erase one of your drawings and he said "come in".

He gave me a drawing. After he had looked through

two other portfolios of drawings. The first portfolio

was filled with drawings that he didn't like. The second

portfolio was filled with drawings that he liked but could

be easily erased. He had a third box which was mixed media like

crayon and all kinds of things, and so I got one of those.

He said he wasn't going to make it easy for me.

And he didn't. I spent four weeks erasing that drawing with

about fifteen different types of erasers, and besides that

there's a drawing on the other side.

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~~(How did you feel about Abs. Exp.?)~~

~~Abstract Expressionism, I couldn't stand it.~~

~~I~~ I couldn't stand Abstract Expressionism.

It was a whole business of beatniks and things like that

that was going on and Abstract Expressionists who were

talking about their d sad cup of coffee and they were sepa-

rating themselves from the world, as though they weren't part,

and "see what I do", and "see how I suffer",

~~I~~ And I'm very private about my suffering. If I suffer, it's

my business. If I got some joy, it's your business.

~~(When did you paint.....)~~

~~I~~ I did a painting about Abstract Expression^{is}m just to

see what the difference might be. I painted two paintings

ultimately with the idea that I'd just make them as much alike

as I could without measuring. Part- The point of that was

to see what the difference^e would be between the emotional

content of one and the other.

~~I~~ I couldn't tell the difference after I painted them.

0231

~~(Did the technique of Action Painting affect your work?)~~

I'm sure that the freedoms that the Abstract Expressionists indulged in changed very much the possibilities and gave new permissions to every artist. Pollock, particularly.

~~(Why Pollock?)~~

His Pollock's early paintings were very tight ^{came} out of false fantasy and when he started dripping I think ~~he~~ his whole body was engaged. It became very personal then. And if he could drip paint and de Kooning ^I could smear it and Kline could paint black and white ^{that} only really had to change the scene.

~~(Was there an underground against the establishment?)~~

There wasn't any resistance to the Abstract Expressionists, but look the painters that I knew at that time I think only Jasper Johns and myself gave them enough respect not to copy them.

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~~(Was your work immediately accepted?)~~ C

~~I~~ I was showing from 1949 in the Betty Parsons Gallery, while

I was an art student at the Art League and I just took some works up to Betty Parsons under my arms. Sue and I carried them. She took three. I took three. It was it on the day she was looking at paintings. She said something like, "Well what do you want. You want to show". and I said, "no. I just know that ^{at} some things are going on up here and I like what's going on. I don't understand it, and I just wondered what you thought about these." And she said, "I can't show you until May." And then we went out. I showed a long time without anybody liking the work. I was called a clown. I was supposed to be either against art or just funny and at some point I think it became embarrassing for somebody not to have a piece of mine but it was.... I had many by then.

~~(Is talent necessary? Is handwork necessary?)~~ O

Q I think nearly anyone has talent, but it's how you feel about that talent about whether what you would be willing to give up instead of violating it.

~~(Do you think of yourself as an extremist?)~~

~~Are you trying to be far out?)~~

Q I've always worked naturally, less naturally at one time or another because of some kind of distraction or another but those distractions are very important to life too.

~~I want to.~~

~~(Do you consciously try to be far out?)~~

Q There's no such thing as far out. If you can think of it you've all ready almost done it.

~~(When did you start using silkscreens in your painting?)~~

Q I WAS trying to work with photographic sensitized canvas very much in the same way that I did the all white paintings

that would pick up the shadows, and there's still a project that I have in mind where the walls will just absorb whatever images appear in that room and be able to keep them and the photographic process was unsuccessful because you could only take away images you couldn't add images after the process and so getting into silkscreen was somehow a compromise in the sense of the information, I was into information very heavy, the information and particular immediate information. Video would do that now, but that wasn't a ~~was~~ possibility then. I took many of the photographs myself but I've always had this idea about that things just remain the way they're made and nothing else does.

~~(How do you select your images?)~~

I always select my images to look as little like a particular point of view as possible.

~~(Where do you take them from?)~~

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From any source.

(What are some of the sources?)

I can't remember them all, it was just from any source.

I mentioned National Geographic. I mentioned Life Magazine,
but the point is that I'll take my images from any source
whether it's Life Magazine, National Geographic, a letter left
on this table.

(Do you think you're involved in nostalgia?)

Once I was in collage and my works were put people would send
me special old things and I always avoided special things.
I wanted something with the content to have so little
information that it would allow room for anybody's imagination.

(Do you think you're an urban artist?)

Like Cornell. ^{him} Cornell worked in special things. I think I'm
more unlike ^{him} than any other artist that I could ever imagine.

He had several layers of glass, a beautiful artist,
but just another thing.

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~~Urban critst?~~

~~If~~ I think I'm a people artist.

~~(Has NY affected your work?)~~

~~New York has more people than anytdy~~

~~(What was the most important event in your life as an artist?)~~

~~I~~ I think the reason that I can't figure out what the most
important ~~event~~ thing in my life, what moment that was is
because my focus is really on the next few minutes.

~~(What is Pop Art?)~~

~~I knew what second hand Pop Art is.~~

~~If~~ Second Hand Pop Art is Pop Art, but each person has his ~~own~~
own individual style and it's come from something else.

Literally Pop Art is a name that Alloway made up for a show in England. I don't think that that classification did anything but stop people from doing what they were doing or gave them an incentive to continue what they were doing because they were doing Pop Art. For instance, I don't think Roesnquist has ever done Pop Art. ~~His history~~ is absolutely natural.

~~(Did popular culture affect your work?)~~

~~Everything affects my work if I'm really working.~~

~~(What do you think of MacLuhan?)~~

~~(Did MacLuhan affect your thinking?)~~

John Cage was trying to read MacLuhan to me, and I said that's an oversimplification. Then I met him, and it just doesn't work and it turns out that he just does not like people. He doesn't like the society, so how can he be a critic profoundly and be ~~at~~ outside of it. That's one of the things

I had against the Abstract Expressionists.

What is that the party me school?

(Does art have to be related to life?)

INTERVIEW TOPICS

> CARDBOARDS

> BECOMING AN ARTIST

> JOHN CAGE influence

> BLACK MT. COLLEGE

> FAMILY BACKGROUND

> USE OF OBJECTS IN ART

> COLLAGE

> Combines

> ERASED DE KoonING

> Abstract Expressionism

> use of silk screens

> Pop ART