

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Peterson, William / Questions on Rachel Rosenthal, 1991

06/26/91 23:40

LORENZ ALHADEFF

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26 June 1991

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San Diego, CA 92116
(619) 294-3393

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

Dear Mr. Rauschenberg:

Thank you for agreeing to take to time to respond to some or all of the attached questions on Rachel Rosenthal.

Thus far, I have conducted over sixty interviews and have already completed a dissertation on the Instant Theatre. At the present time, St. Martin's Press and Routledge Chapman & Paul have expressed an interest in a more expanded version of that work which would cover Rosenthal's entire performance career.

Needless to say, you need not feel under any obligation to stick to the questions as they appear on this list. If there is an area of inquiry that I have overlooked, I would appreciate it if you could point it out and provide your own observations.

Please feel free to call me at (619) 294-3393 if anything requires further explanation.

Thanks again for your assistance.

Sincerely,



William Peterson

Enc.

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QUESTIONS FOR ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ON RACHEL ROSENTHAL

1. When did you first meet Rosenthal?
2. What were your first impressions of her?
3. What contributions did she bring to you, your circle, your own aesthetic?
 - a. Did you ever collaborate or consider collaborating with her?
4. Is it true that you took Rosenthal's loft (situated below John's) after she left NY in August 1955?
 - a. Do you remember the address?
 - b. What was that neighborhood like at the time?
5. Was the arts community in NY aware of what Rosenthal was doing in Los Angeles with the Instant Theatre (IT)?
 - a. Did you or anyone you know see IT?
 - b. If so, when did you/they see IT and what was your/their reaction to the work?
 - c. Is it appropriate to speak of IT as an important contemporary of the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre?
6. There appears to have been a strong relationship between IT and the assemblage aesthetic and junk sculpture. In Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast, Peter Plagens observes: "If the spirit of assemblage lives, it's indirectly, in the catharsis of Process and performance art."
 - a. Do you believe that performance is a natural outgrowth of assemblage?
 - b. If so, when did the two become linked for you?
 - c. It is traditional to point to the Black Mountain event as the prototype of this kind of performance activity. Yet there were earlier precedents (for example Dada and Futurist performance). Is it possible to say when this kind of art-based performance activity actually began?
 - d. Would it be correct to say that Rosenthal's work with the IT was the first instance of non-text based, non-matrixed, art-based performance activity on the West Coast?
 - e. Is the work of IT important even if it did not appear to have a direct, lasting legacy?
7. Rosenthal has stated in interviews with me that one of the reasons she left NY was because your aesthetic, and that of your mutual friends Johns, Cunningham, and Cage, was so much more well developed than hers at the time. According to Rosenthal, she felt that she had to leave in order to discover her own artistic core. Does this seem like an accurate assessment, or can you think of other reasons she might have left NY in 1955? Was she running away from something?
8. Rosenthal seems to have taken a long time to become a feminist but when she did, she embraced it fully. Was she a proto-feminist in 1950s in the same way that Carolee Schneemann was in the 1960s?
9. Are you familiar with Rosenthal's current work? If so:

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- a. What relationship do you see between her current work and her earlier performance work?
 - b. How do you respond to the content in her current work (for example, the brain mind split, Goddess culture, threat of nuclear annihilation, concern for the environment, animal rights, break-up of continents)?
 - c. How do you respond to her multi-layered style of presentation (her use of video, slides, music, movement, acting, humor)?
 - d. How would you position her current work in relation to contemporary performance art?
10. What is your personal relationship with Rosenthal like today?
- a. Did you stay friends with her? Why or why not?

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RR INTERVIEW RE RACHAEL ROSENTHAL

1. WHEN DID YOU FIRST MEET ROSENTHAL?

RR. IN NEW YORK IN THE EARLY 1950s.

2. WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

RR. I WAS IN ADMIRATION OF HER DYNAMIC EXTREMES. ONE DAY SHE WOULD BE A SCULPTOR, CARRYING A 50-POUND BAG OF PLASTER UP FIVE FLOORS, AND THE NEXT DAY SHE HAD HER PARTY CLOTHES ON, HEADING UPTOWN.

PART OF RACHAEL'S CHARM WAS HOW FICKLE HER CAREER WAS. ONE DAY IT WAS JAZZ MUSIC, PAINTING THE NEXT, SCULPTURE THE NEXT. SHE WAS INSPIRING BECAUSE OF HER RESTLESSNESS IN THOSE DAYS OF ALL OUR EARLY CAREER INSECURITIES. SHE WAS AMBITIOUS AND THOROUGH, BUT ALWAYS CHANGING.

3. WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS DID SHE BRING TO YOU, YOUR CIRCLE, YOUR OWN AESTHETIC?

a. DID YOU EVER COLLABORATE OR CONSIDER COLLABORATING WITH HER?

RR. I COLLABORATED WITH HER ON GENETT'S (?spell?) IN A PRODUCTION OF "THE MAIDS" THAT POLITICALLY WAS CANCELLED BEFORE IT WENT ON--BUT WE HAD A GOOD TIME DOING IT.

4. IS IT TRUE THAT YOU TOOK ROSENTHAL'S LOFT...ETC.....

RR. THE LOFT WAS ABOVE, NOT BELOW, JOHN'S ON PEARL STREET. THE BUILDING DOESN'T EXIST ANYMORE. I TRADED HER A PAINTING FOR THE PHONE DEPOSIT, TUB, AND HOT WATER HEATER. I HAD BEEN LIVING WITHOUT HOT WATER AND A PHONE FOR MOST OF MY NEW YORK LIFE, SO IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD TRADE. BUT THE FIRST DAY

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THE HEATER SPRANG A LEAK AND I ENDED UP WITH A THREATENED LAWSUIT AFTER THE FLOOD, FROM THE LITHO COMPANY ONE FLOOR BELOW JASPER. WHEN THEY FOUND OUT I HAD NO MONEY THEY DROPPED THE CHARGES AND JUST REMAINED ANGRY FOR THE REST OF THE TIME I LIVED THERE.

4b. WHAT WAS THAT NEIGHBORHOOD LIKE AT THAT TIME?

RR. ONE BLOCK FROM THE FULTON FISH MARKET, WHICH GAVE US LOTS OF "NATURAL AIR," AND COMPLETELY ABANDONED ON THE WEEKENDS. IT WAS AS CLOSE AS YOU COULD LIVE DOWNTOWN AND BE IN THE COUNTRY.

5. WAS THE ARTS COMMUNITY IN NY AWARE OF WHAT ROSENTHAL WAS DOING IN LOS ANGELES WITH THE INSTANT THEATRE?

a. DID YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW SEE IT?

b. IF SO, WHEN DID YOU/THEY SEE IT AND WHAT WAS YOUR/THEIR REACTION TO THE WORK? c. IS IT APPROPRIATE TO SPEAK OF IT AS AN IMPORTANT CONTEMPORARY OF THE LIVING THEATRE, THE OPEN THEATRE, AND GROTOWSKI'S POLISH LABORATORY THEATRE?

RR. RACHAEL'S CONCEPT OF THE INSTANT THEATRE WAS REVOLUTIONARY TO THE WHOLE COUNTRY. IT WASN'T UNTIL SHE MOVED TO L.A. THAT IT BECAME SERIOUS HISTORY.

6. THERE APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN A STRONG RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IT AND THE ASSEMBLAGE AESTHETIC AND JUNK SCULPTURE. IN **SUNSHINE MUSE: CONTEMPORARY ART ON THE WEST COAST**, PETER PLAGENS OBSERVES: "IF THE SPIRIT OF ASSEMBLAGE LIVES, IT'S INDIRECTLY, IN THE CATHARSIS OF PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE ART."

a. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT PERFORMANCE IS A NATURAL OUTGROWTH OF ASSEMBLAGE?

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b. IF SO, WHEN DID THE TWO BECOME LINKED FOR YOU?

RR. (a & b) OBJECTS PROVOKE A REACTION. RACHAEL'S INSTANT THEATRE INCLUDED OBJECTS TO INDUCE A SPONTANEITY THAT WAS NOT UNLIKE WHAT PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS WERE INVOLVED IN. HER ATTITUDE WAS COMPLEMENTARY TO PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS IN THE SENSE THAT THE SEARCH WAS FOR THE SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALITY OF THE OPERATOR. AT THAT TIME THERE WAS AN ATTEMPT TO SIMULTANEOUSLY CELEBRATE THE UNIQUENESS OF BOTH THE PERFORMER AND THE SPECTATOR TO BE JOINED IN A CREATIVE CONFUSION.

5 c. IT IS TRADITIONAL TO POINT TO THE BLACK MOUNTAIN EVENT AS THE PROTOTYPE OF THIS KIND OF PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY. YET THERE WERE EARLIER PRECEDENTS (FOR EXAMPLE DADA AND FUTURIST PERFORMANCE). IS IT POSSIBLE TO SAY WHEN THIS KIND OF ART-BASED PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY ACTUALLY BEGAN?

RR. c. PROBABLY WITH THE GREEKS.

5 e. IS THE WORK OF IT IMPORTANT EVEN IF IT DID NOT APPEAR TO HAVE A DIRECT, LASTING LEGACY?

RR. IN ITS SPONTANEITY IT BECAME AN ANTIDOTE OF MEMORY.

8. ROSENTHAL SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN A LONG TIME TO BECOME A FEMINIST BUT WHEN SHE DID, SHE EMBRACED IT FULLY. WAS SHE A PROTO-FEMINIST IN THE 1950s IN THE SAME WAY THAT CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN WAS IN THE 1960s?

RR. I WOULDN'T COMPARE THEM.

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9. ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH ROSENTHAL'S CURRENT WORK? IS SO.....

RR. RACHAEL HAS MADE MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS ON ALL FRONTS
YOU MENTION AND I'M SURE THERE IS MORE TO COME.

10. WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH ROSENTHAL LIKE
TODAY?

RR. I STILL ADMIRE AND LOVE HER.

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