

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION

Stories Project. ACC 54.

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York.

Annina Nosei (b. 1938) is an Italian-born gallerist. After stints working at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris and as a professor in the United States during the early 1960s, she married contemporary art dealer John Weber (whom she met through Robert Rauschenberg) and began to show and deal contemporary works in 1979. Open 1980 to 2006, the Annina Nosei Gallery exhibited works by artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Barbara Kruger, and Shirin Neshat. She first encountered Rauschenberg's work while assisting Michael and Ileana Sonnabend and met the artist during the 1964 Venice Biennale. Due to her longtime friendship with artist Cy Twombly, association with the artist collective ONCE Group, and a variety of gallery connections, she and Rauschenberg shared social circles throughout his lifetime.

Transcript of interview with Annina Nosei conducted by David White, Senior Curatorial Advisor from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, March 7, 2024.
Transcript reviewed by the speakers April 2025.

David White [DW]: Okay, now we are recording. I see the little numbers are going up. I'm sitting here with Annina Nosei in her apartment in Manhattan on Riverside Drive, and we're going to speak about her knowledge and involvement with Rauschenberg.

Annina Nosei [AN]: Yes, long time ago. I was in Paris one summer because I was with a group of actors together with Ken Dewey [performance artist and director] that was friendly with [Anna] Halprin [forerunner of postmodern dance and founder of San Francisco Dancers' Workshop], and there was a big show done in the theater. I forgot the name [Théâtre Récamier].

DW: Okay. That's easy enough to find out. It's in Paris, you say?

AN: Yeah, in Paris. And the play was called *The Gift*. So, I was asked to go with them because I was always involved in so-called Happenings and stuff like that, at the beginning in Rome. I went there, but I was younger than the other people, but also, again, because I could translate the French, the English, and the Italian. Before the play there was *Mondo Cane*, the film that [inaudible]. And the friend, he liked me, was the musician, Chet Baker. That was part of the play, and it was very difficult for

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me to get him to make it to the theater in time. Anyway, this Ken Dewey asked me at a certain point, if I could, with another person, do something in the intermission in between the two acts. I didn't know what to do. But I came out and I saw a couple of people, Ileana and Michael Sonnabend. I went there and I told them who I was.

I said that I was the student of Giulio Carlo Argan [Italian art historian and politician]. I had gotten a Fulbright, but it's still 1963. My travels to go to the United States to teach at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor would be the fall of 1964. At the end of my talking, Ileana Sonnabend [art dealer] said to me, "Can you please come and work for my gallery now?" I said, "Great, thank you." So I went back to Rome. I told my father, he was happy, and I went. I went to sleep in a room that looked like the inside of a package because it was the room of Christo [artist]. Christo went to New York and my father said, "Do you need some money?" "No, I don't need any money." I never got money from my father. So, I was working for Ileana Sonnabend. One of the first shows [there] that I liked the most was the drawings of Dante's *Divina Commedia* by Rauschenberg. Michael Sonnabend [Ileana's husband and a historian] loved it, the poetry, so he wanted to sit in the gallery, looking at the drawings of Rauschenberg with me, an Italian, telling him the parts of Dante. This is one of the first things that I had to do. I was very impressed. Anyway, the time passed. The time passed, and the summer came – not the summer, late in 1964. And there was the biennial of . . .



Robert Rauschenberg
Canto II: The Descent, from the
series *Thirty-Four Illustrations
for Dante's Inferno*, 1958
Solvent transfer with graphite,
gouache, colored pencil, and
cut-and-pasted paper on paper
14 3/8 x 11 3/8 inches (36.5 x
28.9 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art
Given anonymously
RRF 60.D002

DW: In Venice?

AN: In Venice. Yeah. And so Ileana Sonnabend and I kept staying at the typewriter. I didn't have a computer at the time, to list all the paintings of Rauschenberg that would go there. But then some would come from New York, some of them from Paris, and some of them were at the Academy of Venice.

DW: Now were these works that were chosen by Alan Solomon [director of the Jewish Museum from 1962 to 1964, where he mounted the first retrospective of Rauschenberg's work in 1963. Solomon was also the United States Commissioner at the 1964 Venice Biennale, where Rauschenberg won the International Grand Prize in Painting] or Ileana?

AN: Probably Rauschenberg, probably. While I was there – I remember because I didn't pay so much – I went to see the Gallery of Panza in North Italy [the Panza Collection owned by Count Giuseppe di Biumo and his wife Rosa Giovanna]. I can't remember the –

DW: Oh, I know, in Varese?

AN: Probably because also there we did all the shows of Sol LeWitt. And I remember that, with me in front of a painting of Rauschenberg, one of those that was more like . . . Not a painting, you cannot really call it a sculpture, but a combination of things.

DW: What Bob called Combines (1954–1964), because it was a sculpture, acting like a painting and a painting acting like a sculpture, as Jasper Johns described it.

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Robert Rauschenberg

Winter Pool, 1959

Combine: oil, paper, fabric, wood, metal, sandpaper, tape, printed paper, printed reproductions, handheld bellows, and found painting on two canvases with ladder

90 x 58 1/2 x 4 in. (228.6 x 148.6 x 10.2 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gift of Steven and Alexandra Cohen and Purchase,

Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, Bequest of Gioconda

King, by exchange, Anonymous Gift and Gift of Sylvia

de Cuevas, by exchange, Janet Lee Kadesky

Ruttenberg Fund, in memory of William S. Lieberman,

Mayer Fund, Norman M. Leff Bequest, and George A.

Hearn and Kathryn E. Hurd Funds, 2005

RRF 59.023



Robert Rauschenberg

Untitled, ca. 1954/1958

Combine: oil, graphite, crayon, paper, canvas, fabric, newsprint, photographs, wood, glass, mirror, tin, cork, and found painting with pair of painted leather shoes, dried grass, Dominique hen on wood structure mounted on five casters

86 1/2 x 37 x 26 1/4 inches (219.7 x 94 x 66.7 cm)

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

The Panza Collection

RRF 55.007

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AN: And [Giuseppe] Panza said that that was the best thing of his life. He thought that he was the best artist. He loved it, and he carried on about his life. How important it was for him to be there in front of that painting. I was very impressed. Later, he was also very impressed in front of a Sol LeWitt, which John Weber [art dealer and husband of Annina Nosei from 1966 to 1973] actually sold to him. But that [Rauschenberg] obviously was sold by maybe Ileana. Anyway, I spent some time on that trip. What I know is that the most important time I spent was in front of that painting by Rauschenberg. Anyway, I came back, I came to Paris, et cetera. Then it was time to go to Venice, to go and talk with Alan Solomon because he was the director of the American Academy [as United States Commissioner for the 1964 Venice Biennale, Solomon was in charge of the American Pavilion]. Which I did, and I liked him. And later I also met him in New York.

But the fact is that it was announced that Rauschenberg was getting the Golden Lion and some paintings that were there at the Academy [former American Consulate] had to go to the Giardini by boat [only one Rauschenberg work had been exhibited at the U.S. Pavilion on the Biennale's grounds; the remaining works had been hung at the former American Consulate. At the last minute, in order to satisfy the eligibility requirements for the International Grand Prize in Painting, Solomon moved three paintings from the Consulate to the U.S. Pavilion.]. I remember being there with a piece of paper, seeing these paintings coming from the land to the boat to go to the Giardini. And I was wondering, when they get to Giardini, how will they get it inside in the room? Because there was a way with the water, not to come from the entrance, but to go behind the garden and enter from there. So that was the thing. But in doing that, Rauschenberg said that he wanted to hire me for something. And those were the first dollars that I had, which actually was twenty-five dollars. The reason was that he wanted me to translate in Italian, in English, all the pieces of paper [with the set and light cues] that he had decided on [for a performance of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on June 18, 1964 in Venice during their International Tour which coincided with the Venice Biennale. Rauschenberg was the Company's resident designer.]. The stage of the theater, Teatro La Fenice, would move in front of Merce Cunningham's dancers, who were doing a show by John Cage. At the time, La Fenice was fantastic, and it had an enormous number of machines to lift and bring down parts of the stage. Things that came from the ceiling – besides the lights on the side – I don't know the English. The thing that comes –

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Robert Rauschenberg with Annina Weber (Nosei), Leo Castelli, and others celebrating after winning the Golden Lion at the 32nd Venice Biennale, Venice, 1964. Photo: Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs

DW: All kinds of mechanical things for moving parts of the stage.

AN: There are names, specific, whatever. The floor of the stage could go up and down in many places and would even come up very high. We were up in, let's say, in a little room, not in the middle of the stage but on the sides with Rauschenberg. And we talked about it, and he gave me a piece of paper with the numbers and pages and letters for the moving, whatever he wanted. So eventually, the play started. I went there, I had a piece of paper, there was no cellphone, there was a machine. Now the Venetians don't speak in Italian, they speak Venetian. But I mean, of course they understood my Italian. I don't know what they're saying when they speak in Venetian, I don't understand anything. I also had the pieces of paper, so Rauschenberg didn't have to tell me what was next to me. And I start, "AB3," and the dancers are on the right, and all of a sudden, the parts of the stage lit up on the left. And then the next one, "light there, okay" – completely dark where the dancers are and light all over the place. So, I realized right away that Rauschenberg had dyslexia. I said, "Bob . . ." So okay, we are trying to figure it out. While the dancers are there trying to figure it out with him: "this is not B," then "it's that G" and "GG is actually D."

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Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg, possibly doing lighting for a performance during the Merce Cunningham Dance Company world tour, 1964. Photo: Saulnier

DW: How complicated.

AN: Difficult. I tried as much as I could, but whatever. They kept dancing, whatever. Then there was an intermission, there was a break. So, Bob and I, we tried to make it . . . “Okay, let’s sit down for a moment. Let’s do it. Try together. Okay. Or at least tell me there, then I’ll figure it out myself. Say, there, then I will figure it out.” Even at the end, where everybody’s applauding in the dark, it was a complete confusion. We went out. John Cage loved it because he loved chaos.

DW: And this was made for him, it sounds like.

AN: He just loved it. So somewhere, maybe in the book – I don’t think so – but there are photographs where we are at the restaurant, and John Cage is talking with me. And he liked, not the mess that I did, I didn’t do the mess actually – it was Rauschenberg – but it was nice because he understood that I tried the best I could, whatever. But he asked me, “Where are you going?” And I say, “I won’t go back to Paris, even though Ileana Sonnabend . . .” I took a walk in the park, and she said, “Why can’t you remain with me?” I said, “No, I have a Fulbright.” And so, I went to Michigan, Ann Arbor, and John Cage said, “That’s great because you are going to meet the ONCE Group.” Don Ashley was the head of it. Ashley – I’ll show you. I have a book because I put him in a book. Ashley was the director of the ONCE Group [Robert Ashley and Don Scavarda were among two of the founders of the ONCE

Group].

The ONCE group was one of the first ones that did, let's call them Happenings. And he did them not only in Ann Arbor but also in Ohio somewhere, in New York, and then in New York at the Hudson Theater and whatever. Gordon Mumma, [a composer] who had worked with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, was also part of the ONCE Group. Okay. So, I went to Paris with the ONCE Group, even though I was teaching at the university [University of Michigan], and I was making at least one third more than my father who was teaching at the University of Rome. Anyway, Rauschenberg was a friend. So, I went there, and I met the one who just died.

DW: Oh, Steve Paxton [American dancer, choreographer, and a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater].

AN: Yes, Paxton. Then that group of Paxton and the other people, which in this moment I forget, they came in the summer to my house in Tuscany, and they were doing all kinds of things. But Rauschenberg wasn't there at the beach. Anyway, I would go to his house and meet Paxton, et cetera.

DW: In the house in Manhattan?

AN: In Manhattan.

DW: In Lafayette Street?

AN: In Lafayette upstairs. And there, I said, "I'm going to go to Los Angeles because now just all of a sudden they offered me a job at UCLA." "Fantastic. Congratulations. That's great," he [Rauschenberg] said. "So, the best thing is that you're going to meet John Weber." Okay. So, John Weber obviously knew Rauschenberg. John Weber had worked for [art dealer and gallerist] Martha Jackson [American art dealer and gallerist], and he left her for a particular reason. I mean, I don't know exactly, but he told me that he tried to talk to Martha about Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, and she was not interested. Eventually, she became a little bit interested in Andy Warhol, but mostly in the abstract artists, who were also friends of John.

But John Weber also was friends with Virginia Dwan. And she had a gallery in Los Angeles, the Dwan Gallery. And so, Rauschenberg said, “You’re going to Los Angeles. The first thing you have to do, is to go to the Dwan Gallery and introduce yourself to John Weber because of me,” which is what I did. By the way, the first time that I went, there was a show of all black paintings. And I said, “What is it?” Somebody [Rauschenberg] already does it. But it was Ad Reinhardt.

Now, John Weber had also worked on a show of Ad Reinhardt in Ohio. Tom Colt [Thomas C. Colt Jr., director of Dayton Art Institute, Ohio] that was the director, a friend of his. John worked in Florida somewhere during the Korean War. He liked the radio, so they put him to work in the radio, and I also have a card of him there. When they were finished, veterans could go to school for free. I mean, they didn’t have to pay some university. So, he went to Antioch [College, Ohio] and that’s where he married the first wife. Then he came back to New York with Martha Jackson. Then he went to Los Angeles, and that’s where I went [Weber began working at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962]. And that’s where I married him. But the ONCE Group made also some shows, which unfortunately I don’t remember the name of it, in the Judson [Dance] Theater [New York], where Rauschenberg –

DW: In Manhattan.

AN: Rauschenberg came, et cetera.

DW: Did Rauschenberg ever perform in any of the ONCE Group shows?

AN: No, I think that he was performing something very important in Antioch. I think it’s called the *11 Evenings*.

DW: Oh, there’s one called *9 Evenings* [*9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering*, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, Oct. 14 and 23, 1966, organized by Billy Klüver and Rauschenberg].

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William Davis, Alex Hay, and Lucinda Childs in Childs's *Vehicle*, presented as part of *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering* at the 69th Regiment Armory, New York, NY, October 1966. Photo: Unattributed.

AN: That's right. Nine, yeah, that's what he did. And we went with John Weber, but it was a couple of years later and we came from Los Angeles to do that.

DW: That was at the Armory in Manhattan.

AN: I went there and I have the poster in Rome. I still have that – I saw they put up the same poster at the Museum of Modern Art once, they showed it again. But it's up there in New York.

DW: I think Rauschenberg did do something in Ann Arbor at one point, but I'd have to look and find out [ONCE Again Festival (1965)]. So then did you continue to see Rauschenberg from time to time in New York after the . . .

AN: A little bit, not much. But then of course, if there was a show in Los Angeles, if you look at the number, probably . . . I already was back to New York, and I'll tell you why. But I went to see the show at the Ace Gallery [Los Angeles, *Robert Rauschenberg: Carnal Clocks*, April 24–May 30, 1969]. And we came back to New York because Virginia Dwan decided to abandon Los Angeles and come to New York. And that's where we went. John was the director of the gallery on 57th Street. And then at a certain point, a couple of years or less, Virginia said that she wanted to be closed out. So, John and many other people went to Lower East Side with Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend, and [André] Emmerich [Dwan Gallery New York closed permanently in summer 1971. In fall 1971, Weber opened his own gallery at 420 West

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Broadway, which also housed the Leo Castelli Gallery, Sonnabend Gallery, and André Emmerich Gallery]. They all went down. Then the time passed, and then Rauschenberg went somewhere else. Rauschenberg went to, I can't remember the name of the place.

DW: After Castelli, he was at Knoedler Gallery [New York] for a while. But I don't know if you saw the Rauschenberg show at Virginia Dwan in California or not, but there were paintings that basically touched the ceiling and touched the floor [Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, *Robert Rauschenberg*, March 4–31, 1962].



Gallery visitors with *Black Market* (1961) at the *Robert Rauschenberg* exhibition, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, March 1962. Photo: I. Serisawa



Robert Rauschenberg
Navigator, 1962
Combine: oil, wood, and metal on canvas with light bulb and electric cord
84 x 60 x 8 inches (213.4 x 152.4 x 20.3 cm)
Museum MMK für Moderne Kunst
Former collection of Karl Ströher, Darmstadt
RRF 62.002

AN: See, that was before me. I think it was before me.

DW: And I don't know. He was told that the ceilings were this high, and so he made the paintings that tall.

AN: I don't remember.

DW: They just fit, in fact.

AN: No, I wasn't there. Because I would've remembered.

DW: Oh, sure.

AN: John Weber could not see out of one eye, by the way, but he did a lot of Minimal art because of that. He did the show, Carl Andre.

AN: But I'm not sure if I saw the photographs or if I was there.

DW: Sure. No, it gets harder to remember years past because you've seen the photographs so much. Now tell me, where is, or was, your house in Tuscany?

AN: My house in Tuscany is at the beach in Ansedonia. Ansedonia is called Ansedonia, but it was in a town the ancient Romans called Cosa. The town of Cosa was up on the hill, the rocks, where they gave boats to the war of Cartagena, the Punic Wars.

DW: Then you met [Elizabeth] Betty di Robilant [American artist] when you were there?

AN: There. Yes, that's right. Because he [Alvise di Robilant, Italian journalist and writer married to Betty] had a house on the Monte Argentario. That's right. And his wife was a friend of Cy Twombly, Betty. Now, I was friend of Twombly from when I was at school because he had married the sister of George of Franchetti.

DW: Yeah, Tatiana Franchetti.

AN: Right.

DW: Yeah.

AN: That was a friend of ours. Mine, whatever. And then that's why I knew Cy Twombly in my life. And then I met –

DW: And then he and Betty were such close friends from their school days, of course.

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AN: That's right. So, I would go there and they had the swimming pool, and I would go there and Tristano [son of Betty and Alvis and godson of Twombly] and my daughter would play in the swimming pool, et cetera.

DW: Nice. We covered all the things that I was hoping to hear from you. I loved when you had told me that story briefly at Tristano's opening. So, I can't thank you enough.