

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Ed Chappell

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ed Chappell conducted by Cameron Vanderscoff on July 21, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Ed Chappell

Location: Naples, Florida

Interviewer: Cameron Vanderscoff

Date: July 21, 2015

Q: So today is Tuesday, July 21, 2015 and this is Cameron Vanderscoff here with Ed Chappell for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project. We're here at his residence in Naples, Florida. And so in an email exchange that we had, you recommended that we start with the first encounter, a photo shoot that you had with Bob, and move forward from there. I'd like to do that but before we start that trajectory, I'd like to know a little bit about the context you brought with you as a photographer, to working with Bob Rauschenberg. So if you could just briefly say a little bit about your background with photography, how you came to be a photographer and leading into that first— How that opportunity came up for that first shoot.

Chappell: Well, I'd been a photographer for about ten or fifteen years before I met Bob. I was a commercial advertising photographer, editorial, in Naples, Florida and also did a little traveling with the commercial work—resort work, architectural, lifestyle, aerial. But I had a little knack for doing editorial work, portraits and so forth. So that's basically my history there.

I was asked by a local magazine to photograph Bob for a cover they had. And so that was my first encounter.

Q: And so what was the magazine? Tell us a little bit more about the context of that shoot.

Chappell: The magazine was *Gulfshore Life*, a local area magazine. They were running a story on Bob and they had asked me if I would be up for the challenge and I said, “Of course.” They immediately gave me a contact name on Captiva [Florida]. I never really spoke with Bob, but was trying to work out the details of when and where and how long. They were very specific on, “You can only have an hour with him,” and, “You can come up before him and scout a couple areas, but he’s busy,” and so forth, and, “So you’ve got X amount of time to get a shot done.” So they showed me several locations and I had decided on his main house, the Gulf House as they called it, late in the afternoon. And so that’s when the fun began.



Cover of *Gulfshore Life* magazine, Summer 1992, with photograph by Ed Chappell

I showed up that day and started photographing. Those images were the very first images, obviously, that I’d taken of him; they later ended up being used in the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York], and this tag, this one portrait was, as he would say, his favorite image of himself. At the time we were shooting, I was just another photographer coming there for a short amount of time, because obviously he had many requests for that sort of thing. We started

shooting and one hour led into another hour and I think I was there for about three hours and Bob was having fun with it. We were connecting; we were having fun.

At the time, in the Gulf House, as most people will know if they knew Bob at that time, he only had one sofa in this large area and he had a kitchen/dining area that had a high tabletop there and other than that, that was all there was, with some chairs around it. Towards the end of the shoot, I'm under the sofa and he starts laughing at me, he goes, "I have this whole room here. There's nothing in the way, and you're under the only sofa there." I was trying to get a better angle and the sofa was in the way; I wanted to shoot up on him, so I slid under. He got a big laugh out of that. And then obviously we had a really good time, and we said goodbye, had some snacks with him, something to drink, and then I took off. I asked them at the time if they would be interested in seeing any of the images and they kind of said, "Sure, whatever." Next thing you know, I got the images, I sent them up, and he really liked them. I proceeded to do my first deal with Bob and give him some usage rights for a few years on several of the images.

From then on, very shortly afterwards, he would call me up for things, and ask me if I was busy. He had something going on, and he said, "Would you be interested in helping me with this project or photographing this?" So that's kind of how it started going into that part of it. I think it was the *Labyrinth* [*A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)*, 1994]; do you know which one I'm talking about? I'm trying to see if I've got it on the next couple slides.



Rauschenberg in his studio with *A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)* (1994), Captiva, Florida, 1994. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

Q: Oh yes, I have seen those. So for context, what year is this, where you did this photo shoot?

Chappell: I would think this was 1992.

Q: Okay. So I'm curious then, so this is a freelance assignment, is that right, initially? Coming in for this magazine.

Chappell: Yes. From the editorial, yes.

Q: And so what did you know about Robert Rauschenberg, prior to this? Was this someone you'd heard about previously? Or was this just another shoot, you were going to shoot some artist. I'm curious about that.

Chappell: Well, I did a little homework. Not much. They gave me one of his catalogues. From a photography standpoint, I'd heard of him, but not really in the artwork. I really didn't realize

how big he was, how important he was as an artist at the time, to be honest with you. It was another assignment. He seemed to be an older artist. I didn't even really know, hadn't seen any really recent photographs of what he looked like. All I knew was I had this history. He had a huge volume of work. Some of it I understood. A lot of it I did not. Coming from a photography background I could see the photography influences and understand, but his way of working with the collage and all that, it was hard for me to understand at first. As I would tell Bob, it was an acquired taste. It took some educating. And that was an interesting step because he really opened my eyes up. I used to think a single image, that was it as photography. You take one image, a great shot, whatever it is, and you're finished.

Q: That's the piece, yes.

Chappell: That's the piece, that's it. The more I started going up there and seeing what Bob was all about and how he worked, and then obviously as I learned more about the history, he blew all that out the door for me. I had no idea and I started seeing what he was seeing. The best you could say is I could start understanding what he was trying to do. He really blew my mind as far as where else you could take it. It doesn't have to be the final image, you can work with several images, and just this juxtaposition of where you put the images and how he would approach—and his thoughts about—it. He didn't talk a lot about it. But it was really interesting. That's when I started getting more and more involved in him working because I was always up there when he was working or just before working or whatever, and we'd work around dinner and spend the night doing that.

I also photographed his artwork for him later on, mainly because apparently—at the time I didn't know this—I was photographing this *Labyrinth* piece and trying to get some shots for him because he was trying to send it off somewhere and he wasn't happy with what he was getting. I didn't know who he was using. It just so happened, after I'd finished that piece, one of his prints was on the wall and they asked me, "Do you think you could shoot that for us?" I said, "Sure." I was not really documenting artwork; I could do it, but it wasn't my forte. It's not something I'd lived for, to document artwork, but I could do it.

So I went up there, set up the lights, the typical forty-five degree patterns, balanced it, set my 4-by-5 up, this is in the day of film, and shot it. Then I took it to my lab and sent it to him and then I got a call from him again saying, "Would you be interested in coming up and photographing my art?" Not just photographing me for this other thing or whatever, but would you mind coming up and photographing the art? At the time since we would photograph at night, it really wasn't taking much out of my commercial work during the day. I said, "Yes, I'd be interested in that," and plus they were very interesting.

He was very charismatic. The interesting thing about him was that he really wanted to know about you. It wasn't all about him when you walked into his world; it was about everybody. He wanted to know about you. He was very personable and wanted to become friends and I never felt that it was all about—you sit there and bow, here's Bob, and Bob sits there and talks about himself all night. That wasn't the case. He was interested in everybody else, and the stories. His staff up there was basically his Captiva family. When you go out to Captiva, you'll find what I'm talking about. There wasn't a whole lot to do out there at the time.



Rauschenberg's staff/assistants in front of his final painting, *Untitled (Runt)* (2008), Captiva, Florida, 2008. Standing, left to right: Phillip Woods, Darryl Pottorf, Kevin Pottorf, Ed Chappell, and Mark Pace; Sitting: June Getford, Lauren Getford, Matt Hall, Lawrence Voytek, Bradley Jeffries, Kat Epple, and Jonas Stirner.

I know I'm rambling off a little bit, but it was just interesting that he asked me to do that. I got off track a little bit. Apparently the photographer they were using was someone who—

Q: Prior to you.

Chappell: Prior to myself, photographing the artwork would take all night long. In other words he was just meticulously slow, apparently. They would be taking turns sleeping while this guy worked, that's what they had told me. So that they said, "When you did it as fast as you did, Ed, and came through there [laughs] and we like hanging with you, you're a nice guy." They said, "Would you come up and do this for us?" So. And in that aspect of it I said, "Fine."

That started a really great friendship because then I was coming up all the time. And as I would come up, before I would start photographing the pieces, the sun's still up, there's not much to do. That's why you see a lot of portrait work. I'd come and I'd say, "Ah, I got my camera with me,

the light's really nice, Bob. I know you're going to get some calls for some stuff. Do you mind if I take some shots?" He'd go, "Sure," and so he got very comfortable with me.

I also made him a promise, "Anything I shoot of you, even though I retain the copyrights and everything else, I'm going to make a deal with you. You get to look at anything that goes out, no matter who hires me to go do this, or who you recommend, you and I will look at them and those will be the ones," your selects as we would say, "are the ones that will go out." Because he was a little vain. We all would be. He was a good-looking man, but at the same time if he didn't like that look or that pose, he'd say, "No, I don't like that one." I'd say, "Don't worry about that, just X the ones you like on the proof sheets, on the transparencies," whatever they were. I'd say, "Those will be the ones that, when they call, I'll say those are available." So we had that trust going through there.



Robert Rauschenberg in his Captiva Drive studio, Captiva, Florida, ca. 2000. Works in background: *V (Apogamy Pods)* and *Page 40, Paragraph 6 (Short Stories)* (both 2000). Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

He had photographers come out there before who he said would make him up into something he just wasn't. He said, "They'd put me in these outfits, they'd put me in these poses," and things they had envisioned for him and he really didn't feel comfortable with that. He had some very famous photographers shoot him, do a very good job, but at the time I think he wanted a little more control of that situation. He wasn't happy with the way they would portray him, I guess. So he wanted to have a little more control that way.

Q: And so your relationship with him began because you were contracted as a freelancer by—

Chappell: *Gulfshore Life*.

Q: *Gulfshore Life*. But then very quickly you wind up in this, you're being contracted by him directly to come up and do these things.

Chappell: Contacted, not necessarily contracted. Contacted directly to go up to—

Q: It's more informal in that sense.

Chappell: It's much more informal. Actually I photographed him for free. I said that I'd retain the rights and everything to those, and if I could make money selling them—let's say the *New York Times* wanted some shots—I would sell the images or obviously not sell the image, but lease the image out for whatever the purpose would be. That's how we kept that going. When it came to photographing the artwork, I basically just started trading him out. It's something I

could do. I did it at night. So it was actually two different things going on there. One, a photographer coming up and shooting him editorially. Another one, coming up and photographing his artwork because you can't copyright artwork and that was more a very mundane thing that they needed done. And I was willing to do it.

Because where else can you hang out with Rauschenberg? He cooks for you—he was a fabulous cook. The things that he would come up with. Not only that; this was kind of a no-brainer. I enjoyed the company and throughout the years I've met so many interesting people that I could namedrop all afternoon but I'm not going to. The biggest thing was becoming a friend and hearing how he did business at night. Because during the day when all the staff was there and everything else—there were just certain things that they did. But a lot of times Bob's creativity, working on the imagery, the stories, when he was working on the UN [United Nations] series or whatever it is, I always got the one-on-one time with Bob because it was just us. So it was a great way to just become really great friends with him.

When he was getting the Guggenheim and the major retrospective they had in '97 [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective, 1997–98*], I sat there with him at night. He was going through all of his catalogues, all of his work, and laying out the show and telling me stories about why he was doing this one or that one. Everything brought up a memory for him as he was laying out that retrospective. So it was really interesting to see him, and I had no idea—I understood the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] and all these great museums, but to see him actually physically opening all this up at night and seeing these on counters all the way around and how he's very tactile. He's got to see that. He loved that about the Polaroids.

I used to shoot Polaroids in the days of 4-by-5 Polaroids. Our deal was, Bob used to tell me, he'd say, "I love when you come up because I know the piece is finished." I'd go, "Really?" He'd say, "Yes. Ed, we come in here. We put the lights on it, the lights go off, and I have the piece sitting right there, I know it's finished and we finish it." And then I take the Polaroids and I'd say to Bob, "How does that look?" Even though the exposure would tell me on my meter that that thing should be shot at a certain exposure, I would show it to Bob. Bob loved saturation and color. He would always say, "Can you do a little bit more?" and I'd go, "Yes, Bob," so I'd underexpose a little bit more. Some people would have issues with that later down the line and I said, "You could always open this up a little bit, make it a little lighter," but Bob would hold the transparency and even though that wasn't the correct way on the light table, Bob wanted it a certain way and you gave it to him that way.

Sometimes I'd bracket, but we would shoot a lot of different transparencies at night. In the days of the 4-by-5 I would be in that darkroom underneath the studio—I would shoot hundreds of sheets of film and just kept loading the 4-by-5s and coming back up. But we had a certain system—that was in the day, obviously, when we were shooting 4-by-5 film. But the interesting thing about Bob is that he would always say, "I really like this now, the work's done," and he could get through there. We would joke and this was when you got to know him better, as we'd be looking at a piece on the floor, I'd go, "Bob, where's the signature? Because if you don't show me a signature I don't know which way to hang it." And I didn't.

[Laughter]

Chappell: So it was one of those things, we could have a little banter about each other while going through there. I'd say, "Now is it this way or is it this way?" and he'd look at me and go, "It's over there," and so we'd kind of have fun with that. It was just one of those things that we just—we always made it a good time.

That was one thing about Bob, is that he liked to work hard and I've never seen someone produce so much work. He said, "We're not doing a job." He liked working hard and playing hard. But at the same time he was all about the work and having fun doing it. So I had lots of nights where it was just a ball. We just laughed and shot all the work, had great dinners, and I didn't realize quite what I was stepping into. And then of course it transformed from staying in one of his houses near the road to where I was in the main house and always being a special guest so that was kind of fun; it was always very special when I came up.

They tried to hire me at one point and said, "Why don't you just come up and work for us full time?" I said, "Bob, if I did that I wouldn't be special anymore, would I?" [Laughs] I said, "You've got to think about this, Bob." I'd come up a couple times a week, once every two weeks. They traveled a bit, but then I'd come up a lot. I'd stay up there for a couple of days at a time, but do I want to do that full time? I said, "No. Then I'm just like everybody else. Right now you're planning dinner. What do you want?" "No, I got it, Ed," you know, "Do you want this?" Or I'd cook and so it was one of those—why would I want to screw that up? He was laughing and he goes, "Ed, you're right." Not only that and it did add a certain thing whenever I came up, bring up the large format and over here and set up the lights and it became special.

But then he started calling me for—once you get in Bob’s world it was very interesting because he was very inquisitive. He always wanted to learn. I would talk with the tech guys all the time, to [Laurence] Laury [Getford] and all these guys, and I would talk to him all the time because we had this photography and because Bob’s process was a very difficult process. Most things you do when you photograph and take an image you’re trying to make the best possible image out of that. In the transfer process, that isn’t the case. So you’re fighting technology every few months because they make things better and now you’re trying to fight to make that not better, but to get the transfers right and to get the imagery right. So I worked with them a lot; they even bought an old scanner of mine because they were scanning some stuff and their scanner went down, so they bought this scanner of mine to help scan these images in. But it was always a delicate balance because materials that were coming in—they were trying to make them better and we were trying to dumb them down basically. We didn’t want that super sharp image. Now for a lot of things, that was easier to do. But it was a constant battle, how well they would transfer and so forth.

That was always very challenging to me, especially when I would work with Laury—throughout the day we’d work on certain imagery for his pieces. I’m stepping back now. We’re not talking about just photographing artwork. Bob would have these ideas. I’d get a call—I’d be somewhere and it’s Bob. “Sweetie, I’m thinking, do you know how to— Can you get a kaleidoscope thing? Can you photograph that for me or something, so I can use it on this piece?” I’d say, “Well that’s interesting, Bob, let me do a little research on that,” so I’d do some research. I’d try to figure out a way to help him out. He would have, whether it was the [Al] Gore campaign when he was

running for president, Bob obviously donated all these things. One night we took my 8-by-10 and I had it 10 feet up shooting down as he was playing with an American flag and a shovel. I was trying to photograph that for him and we shot these 8-by-10s so he could donate that as part of a poster that he was working on.



Robert Rauschenberg
Unity [Democratic National Committee print
for Al Gore], 2000
Pigmented inkjet print
49 1/2 x 29 inches (125.7 x 73.7 cm)

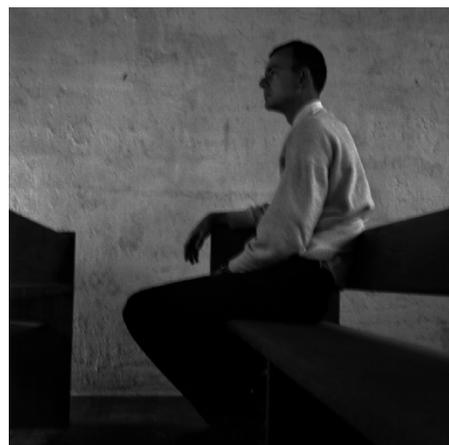
There were so many different things. He would like a certain sculpture and he'd say, "Ed, can you shoot that for me?" Those were the fun things. Then if I traveled somewhere, let's say I went to Mexico and I came back with a bunch of slides, I'd say, "Bob, look at this, look at that," and he'd look at some, "Can I borrow that one?" Yes, so it was a cool thing if Bob actually picked something that would end up in the piece. Like the *Synopsis Shuffle* [1999] piece.

Q: So can you think of any examples of—

Chappell: Yes, at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York; *Robert Rauschenberg: Synopsis Shuffle*, 2000], a couple of my images are right in there, so it's kind of cool to see those in there. So it just developed where whatever he was working on I became one of the assistants coming through. I just had the photographic background, which, obviously, he had to be in the photograph. I used to love when he talked about [Edward] Steichen buying that image from him, back in the Met, going way back when he was a street photographer. So we would look at imagery and we had that connection too, because he was a photographer, a still photographer [note: referring to Steichen's 1952 acquisition of Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Interior of an Old Carriage)* (1949) and *Untitled (Cy on Bench)* (1951) for the Museum of Modern Art, New York].



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (Interior of an Old Carriage), 1949
 Gelatin silver print
 10 1/8 x 9 5/8 inches (25.7 x 24.4 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Nelson A. Rockefeller Fund



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (Cy on Bench), 1951
 Gelatin silver print
 10 1/8 x 9 7/8 inches (25.7 x 25.1 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

So we had a lot of connections there and then of course, Bob had so many projects going on. I got a call once and he was like—I may not have this correct, but it could have been the Seattle

Symphony, they did a big commission piece for them, it was a big one [*Echo [Anagram (A Pun)]*, 1998]. Bob had this idea and he needed some help with it. He said, “Ed, can you find some, I need some really old instruments. I need something that’s had—” You know Bob’s history, he loves to give life to something that’s been discarded. That’s part of the early series, the way he grabbed all of his pieces, and if you saw his piles of stuff—



Robert Rauschenberg
Echo [Anagram (A Pun)], 1998
Inkjet pigment transfer on poly laminate
145 1/2 x 537 inches (369.6 x 1364.0 cm)
Seattle Symphony

Q: His found objects—yes.

Chappell: His found objects. So he wanted me to see if I could find some found objects, some horns and things of that sort that had some life to them, that had been used, really used. I was like where the hell do I start there? So I start hitting all the pawnshops in Naples through Fort Myers [Florida]. The worse it was, the more beat up it was, I would buy it. He’d say, “That wasn’t quite good enough, Ed, can you give me some more? I need something like this.” So he’d send you out. Finally we had some musicians from, I don’t think it was Daytona—it was Edison [Community College, now Florida SouthWestern State College, Fort Myers] at the time, we

found a few. We finally got enough of these and then the process was, what do we do with them? He wanted to transfer these.

I came up with an idea and I talked with Laury, the tech, and we said, “Okay, he’s going to have to transfer these, how best to do it?” I literally tied a monofilament line to the instrument with a white background and I’d just start spinning it and I’d just shoot it every which way, coming right through, and give him all these others. Then I’d show them to Bob and he’d say, “Yes, that’s starting to work for me,” so then we’d do that with a few others. Some would be lying down. We just tried to give him as many things as he could start working with as possible. So that was an interesting thing. He never knew that we’d come up with that, so that was a fun little piece.

When we started getting into digital, I’d been shooting digital for a long time and still shooting the 4-by-5s. I tried to convince him that, “Bob, it’s getting that good now,” and it’s also for shooting and transferring. Digital was getting that good. You could use those cameras instead of having to get film back and scanning everything. We could be shooting this stuff and it could just save a lot of steps—taking the film to the labs and trying to scan them. And what if the film was dirty—which didn’t bother Bob—that’s character. He wasn’t big on spotting prints either. But what was really interesting about that was it took a while because he loved that Polaroid.

Remember, we’d started years ago shooting the Polaroids and I told you—it was finished and he could see the Polaroid. He loved me to pull a couple of them and he’d judge them and say, “That’s the one. Okay,” and, “Do it, that’s good.” It was just a process that we had to go through and digital takes that away from you. So that was a tough one to finally get to him, but I took a

camera and I shot some things around the studio and outside. I told Laury, “Now we’ll take that file and blow it up,” as big as this table we’re sitting around.

Q: Which would be about—

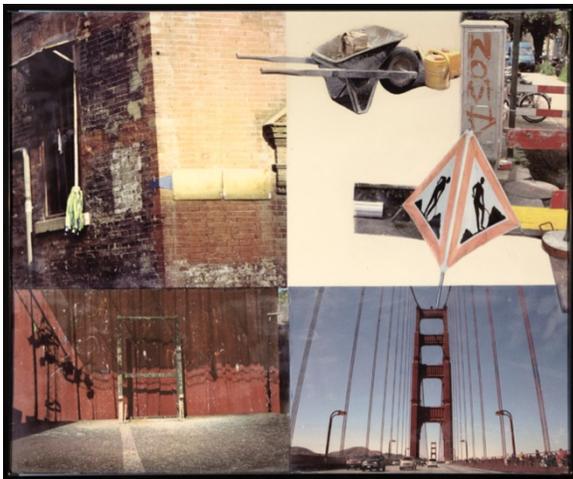
Chappell: Oh, probably about 40-by-60 or so. He didn’t necessarily use these large—at times he would—pieces of acetate, whatever substrate that we were working on. But I wanted him to do a large one just to see how it held up. When I did that, because Laury would be the same way, “I don’t know if it’s ready, it—I don’t if it’s—” And when I showed him this camera and what it could do, he went, “Oh shit, hey Bob,” We all started looking at these prints coming out. The next thing you know, Bob had about four or five of those cameras.

Q: So what was it about that? I’m curious how you made that pitch to him, exactly what you were demonstrating that digital did that you weren’t getting or you were getting a different way. What was that appeal to him?

Chappell: Well, the one thing is, for all Bob’s forward thinking about processes—he was always trying to be out there on the cutting edge of all that—[there were] certain things he liked. Certain things being tactile— He couldn’t look at a computer screen like this and choose an image that he wanted. Part of the process, from what I saw—now this is just my interpretation of it—I saw him sit at his station in the studio and he would take his pieces of paper, his images, and he’d kind of look at them and look at that one and maybe this one. He’d come look at them and his canvas would be over there. You could see him working on that and he’d say, “Okay, go print

me that one, about this size,” and then we’d print it and then he’d go in there and he’d transfer it. Then he’d start looking, sticking around, have a little sip of something to drink, and he’d keep going around and he’d walk around— “So this one here, why don’t you make this about this big,” he’d say, “Send that in there,” and he’d go print on it.

Now there were other times, after he started really getting into that transfer process, when he would have hundreds that he had selected and while he was away traveling they’d just be printing this acetate stuff. So when he came back he had layers of the stuff. Then he could come in there, pick, cut it up however he wanted to do it, and then just start putting this together. And sometimes there would be a little paint involved. Sometimes there wouldn’t. It was really interesting. I’m primarily talking about the *Runts* [2006–08] at this point in time, but—



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (*Runt*), 2008
Inkjet pigment transfer on poly laminate
61 x 73 1/2 inches (154.9 x 186.7 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: So this is 2006, '07, this is—

Chappell: I know I’m bouncing around—

Q: Last few years—

Chappell: But it was just really interesting. I noticed you had something regarding the Whitney. I know I've gone off course there with that one, but the Whitney, the [*Synopsis*] *Shuffle* series that you're familiar with—that was a really interesting, fun time. Because with Bob you never knew what was going to come up. One of the things that we joked about and Bob would joke about was that everyone used to say, "Anyone can make a Rauschenberg." We'd joke and say, "Anyone could make a Rauschenberg, until you tried it and you really couldn't make a Rauschenberg." That was the funny thing, but to the average person, it's, "Oh, I could do that." How many times you've heard someone say, "Oh, I could do that." Well, you didn't do that and, try it. The interesting thing is that I think that's what got him thinking with this series, that he was going to take a painting, slice it up, and his theory was, "Take these apart and go ahead." You build your own Rauschenberg from these images, from the panels. I thought that was just hilarious and I thought it was great. I'm laughing! I believe that's in the early nineties or late nineties probably. But it was hilarious.

Q: We're currently looking for the photograph through a series of digital archives.

Chappell: On what used to be the state-of-the-art CDs. Now they're so antiquated and god forbid I have to use a CD player or a DVD player.

Q: An external disc drive, right?

Chappell: External disc drive, my goodness. It's all jump drives now.

Q: Right. If not just Dropbox or something.

Chappell: Exactly. I work with some pretty large files. I even have a hard time putting Dropbox on my stuff now, but I love my USB drives. This may be closer to 2000. It's interesting, as we're paging through these, it's bringing up all sorts of memories.

Q: Right. What's interesting, looking at some of these prints, as you said, you were very much in the studio there with him and some of these photographs are things as granular as a sponge on a page or something like that and his real attention to—the nuances of his process.

Chappell: Oh, that shirt, I'll tell you. [Laughs] He loved that shirt.



Rauschenberg wearing a shirt made from Samarkand fabric in front of *Beau + Errors [Anagrams (A Pun)]* (1998), Captiva, Florida, 1999 or 2000. Photo: Ed Chappell

[Laughter]

Q: How would you describe that shirt? We're talking about the photograph of—Rauschenberg—

Chappell: I don't know if it's a fireball Mexican—fiesta gone—

Q: It has a little country-and-western sort of, but a little bit louder [laughs]—

Chappell: I don't know who sent that to him, but he put it on in front of that painting for a reason—

Q: Right, with all the colors, yes.

Chappell: He said, "You've got to see this color so we can get this—"

Q: Right, the bright color scheme, red orange.

Chappell: So this is around 2000, I believe. So we got through this. That was an interesting series. I don't know if I have it completely correct, but as Bob was explaining this to me, with the series [*Synopsis Shuffle*], his first thought was to take the average person off the street, the taxi driver, it could be a mailman, it could be just someone walking across the street, and have them come in and make a Rauschenberg. That was how Bob told it to me. That's what he

initially wanted to do. The average man. He was about getting the average person involved in this. But I think as it got presented to the Whitney— And here again, it's been several years, I don't know how accurate I am, but my understanding is Bob, normally he got his way for things of that sort. In this instance, it ended up being, as you can probably tell from the other images, a party with some of his high-profile friends.

Q: Right.

Chappell: That was quite an evening. Bob asked me if I'd come up and would I be interested in photographing it and I said, "Of course, that sounds pretty interesting, Bob." That started with that one piece there and then actually going up and photographing the party. Bob's idea was—it started off in a hat, where you're given numbers; and by the way, he had a lot of A-type personalities there, very competitive people and it became very competitive amongst them. You had different places in line where you could go grab and put your own Rauschenberg together. So they started making deals, backend deals. If Martha Stewart wanted this or Renée [Fleming] wanted this, they would talk and make trades. So this thing just took on a whole life of its own. Bob made cookies with all their faces on it, so we had these cookies with their friends' faces on them. I had those for years. It was one of those events where you had to be there. They all got so into this. Like I said, they were very competitive people, making deals this way and that way to try to get their own pieces together. It was really an interesting event. It was one of those things, you walked away going, "Did I really— Was I really there?" It was just so interesting to see these people come up with their own Rauschenbergs, really studying the works and trying to pull

that piece to get to that piece there. Of course, they had a show after the fact with the pieces together.



Martha Stewart at the Pace Gallery warehouse selecting works for *Robert Rauschenberg: Synapsis Shuffle*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2000. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell



Rauschenberg and Martha Stewart at the Pace Gallery warehouse selecting works for *Robert Rauschenberg: Synapsis Shuffle*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2000. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

Q: With these assembled pieces at that point, the sequenced pieces?

Chappell: Yes, with the assembled pieces. I'd love to see that one come up again.

But it was just one of those things. Where would you come up with something like that? You do so many different things and you're so innovative, but here again—that was just one of the pieces I thought was really quite interesting for him to do, especially on the pretense that anyone could make a Rauschenberg. And he'd have fun with it. He didn't take it too seriously. Also we talked about what he wanted to see in the image and it was about what your thoughts were about it. He wanted to evoke some feelings, some thoughts and everything else about it.

He wasn't into talking too much about it. We'd talk as we put the film together. He'd come in and say, "What do you think of that?" In the process, we'd talk about this and why we liked a certain piece and we got into certain things and that was a great thing, to see how he thought and if something started to flow. How best can I put that? The best way I can come up with is how it flowed. When a piece sometimes has a beautiful flow to it, when it's starting to blend and you kind of see those—

Q: In the process of it being?

Chappell: In the process, in the image itself, as you're creating the work of art. If it's starting to work its way, sometimes your eyes can work very well across the canvas. It's a seamless thing; it just kind of flows. Bob didn't like that. Bob would go, "No, if it's too pretty I don't want it, it's not working, this is too—" and we'd start laughing. He'd go, "No, no, I've got to stop that." So that's why you see a lot of hard lines and a lot of where he stops it going through there. I really found that quite interesting. We'd be working on some pieces and there would be something, he would say, "I can't use that. That one's no good." Of course, I'd be saying, "Well, can I have that one?" [Laughs] He'd laugh and go, "No, that's not working." I'd go, "I'll take the trash." We would joke about that kind of stuff.

He would have some things that he worked on and the more he'd work on it, he'd just say, "Well, that's just not working," and that would be it for that piece. Like I said, I have so many memories, you've got to realize, so many years, so many nights, seeing him work on different things.

Q: So I'm curious about the—we've talked a little bit about Bob's eye and his process and I'd like to get back to that, but first, focusing on your own role as a photographer. You mentioned that in the very first shoot that you did, you took a photograph of him that became widely used. So as a way of thinking about Bob's eye, you mentioned his vanity [laughs] as well in selecting these things, I'm curious about exactly what photograph you're talking about. I'd like to get some sort of—

Chappell: Oh, from the initial photographs? Okay.

Q: Yes, yes, I'm curious about that and then kind of following the evolution of your own role—

Chappell: We'll be up to it in a second. This is the shot.

Q: Right, on the stepladder.



Rauschenberg with a portion of *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–98), Captiva, Florida, 1992. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

Chappell: Yes. That shot, for some reason, he loved it. He said it caught him in a moment where, he said, “I’m totally relaxed, I’m comfortable with you, I’m comfortable—” He said, “It’s the best part of me,” and he said, “I just love the feel of that.” So that became his favorite image; until the day he died, he kept telling me that was one of his favorites, obviously of his latter years. He’d say, “I just love that image,” wherever he could, he’d try to use it. I tried to tell him that, “Bob, that’s why we’re shooting these other shots because you just can’t give them the same image all the time. They’re not going to want to use it.” He understood that. That’s why we had a lot of those others. But he always went back to that. Obviously that’s sort of what got me in the door.

I was quite surprised. I thought I did a good job that day. When you photograph people, sometimes you feel as though you’ve got the connection or you didn’t get the connection depending on whatever’s going on. It just felt really comfortable that day and I knew we were connecting and he was having fun with it. A lot of times with my photography and portraits, I try to be— The biggest thing is to relax people. I talk to them and the more time I can spend usually, the better; it gets more comfortable. Then we just have fun and try to wait for those moments where you capture them. God knows what I said or what he was doing at the time to get him to loosen up, but it was one of those things that— Just everything was working that day. I felt very fortunate. Call it dumb luck. It’s one of those things. I didn’t know I was walking into this world.

Q: And this is the very first time that you—

Chappell: That's the very first time that I met Bob and—

Q: Which is interesting because even so, I've looked not only at this shot, but at a bunch of the others and he does seem very at ease; he's laughing, he's joking, he seems very amenable to being posed in a lot of different ways or posing himself in different ways. So I'm curious about the process of shooting him. You started on this high note of getting this image of him which he liked so much, which has been used in so many different contexts. So I'm curious then—because this interview's about several different things: one is about Bob Rauschenberg as an artist, another one is Bob Rauschenberg as your friend, and then there's also a part of it that is about him as a subject, a photographic subject. And so I'm curious about what were the challenges of shooting him. If you had this rapport and it clearly blossomed into this whole—

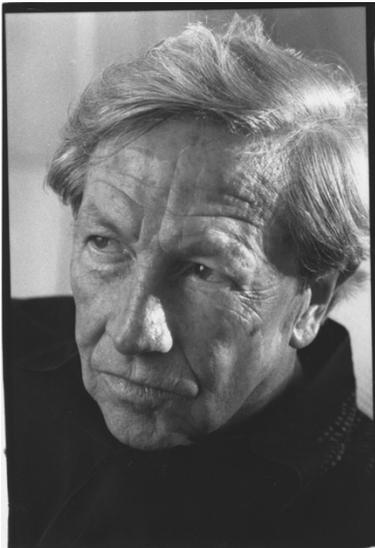
Chappell: Well, I think first and foremost he knew that when I had a camera and I was photographing him, it wasn't going to go anywhere without him saying what was going to happen with the photograph. I think that was what initially gave him that sense of ease. I was told by some of the assistants that he really enjoyed me photographing him because he felt comfortable. I just told you there were photographers who came in there and they would put him in a silver suit and put him on a beach with a horse. There was a very famous photographer and this photographer, Bob told me when he was coming—I was going to try to be there, but I had to be out of town—because I was going to be one of Bob's assistants that day. I wanted to see how this photographer did this. I was curious. It was a very famous photographer, but I was just going to be out of town that time, so I couldn't.

I remember beforehand— Obviously when you go all the way out to Captiva, you're usually staying for lunch or dinner because there's not much out there. So Bob said we could do dinner or lunch and then his assistant sent a whole page worth of things that this photographer must have—he only eats this sort of vegetable, this sort of—and Bob looked at it and handed it to me and he goes, “Look at that.” He said, “He's more famous than I am.” He goes, “He will eat what we serve [laughs] and if he doesn't want it, then that's fine.” [Laughs] He said, “Look at that, Ed, that list, look at this,” and he'd go through the list and I would sit there laughing. He goes, “He's more famous than I am,” and he was laughing. “I don't put lists like this together, have you seen—I'm at someone's house as a guest, if I don't like something, I won't eat it.” [Laughs] I was laughing, I said, “Yes, that's pretty interesting, Bob, the next time I come up I'm going to send you a list first of what I want,” and he goes, “Yes, right.” But anyway, he didn't take himself too seriously with things of that sort.

As far as photographing a subject, the challenges were that once he was comfortable with me, some evenings I would come up and he just wouldn't be in the mood. He'd say, “Are you done?” “Yes—” “You're done,” and I'd say, “Okay, I'm done.” We'd know we were done. So not all evenings he was on his mark. Something would come up or whatever and there would be times where you'd just put it down.

At that time it was hard getting different areas to shoot in because if you're always in certain areas, it can get a little redundant if nothing else. But at certain times I tried to, if the light was really beautiful, because as any photographer will tell you, that last hour or last thirty minutes of light coming in at night is just golden and I'd say, “Bob, I've got to shoot something.” Then he'd

go, “How’s my hair?” Okay, “I wanted to wear that other shirt today.” I’d say, “You’re fine, you’re fine. Just move this around a little bit. You’re not going anywhere, Bob, just let me shoot something because I just love the light coming in.” As a photographer, he understood that, he understood the timing. It’s about the timing. The subject, the lighting, and everything else, he understood that. It was fun and we’d banter with it, so if you look at my proof sheets, I just don’t have him smiling. I have him doing all sorts of different things. We’d try this or that. I had some shots that I really liked later on that were a little more serious. I think those were great shots. Bob didn’t like those so much.



Portrait of Rauschenberg, Captiva, Florida, ca. 1995–98. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

Q: He liked the lighter—

Chappell: He liked the light ones; they were a little bit more approachable. There was a commercial side to Bob too, a sense about portraying what he wanted to portray to the public. I would shoot him very seriously and everything else and he liked those, but Bob liked to portray

an image of that side, which he was most of the time, at least in my world and what I dealt with him with.

Q: So what was that he wanted for these photographs? To convey about himself that— So you were taking photographs of him over a period of years and you were talking with him and had his approval for the prints that you were then actually using and any photos that you were then actually disseminating and releasing in any way and so what's your sense then? Of the sort of images or image that he wanted going out in that way?

Chappell: Well, my sense is that he wanted— We picked a few images that were a little more serious, but he didn't want to take himself too seriously in a lot of situations. We see a lot of these artists where—Jasper Johns is one of them— Have you ever seen the guy smile? And he's a good friend, we've been at parties, and I've known a lot of these other artists in different stories, but that was just not Bob. Bob really wanted to know about you. He wanted to know when I was dating, when I got married, when I had the kids. He was at my house when my kids were small. When you went to Bob's world, it was like you were meeting a friend. He wanted to get caught up on your life, what's going on with you. Even from the beginning, Bob wanted to know about the person. I could see him with other people, he was very personable, he was just very open and one of the kindest men I've known. He had a heart of gold, almost to a fault, I would say.

Q: How so?

Chappell: Well, he was very trusting with some people and I think it got him into some situations at times, in business dealings and so forth. I don't want to get too much into that but there are trust things that people would take advantage of him. But Bob was pretty smart too. He really was sharp and he would rein back this or that, but there were certain things that happened that I'm just—you could tell the people who all they did was want something from Bob when they walked in. There are certain types who came through there and— The interesting thing about my relationship with Bob is that it started off with— I really didn't know too much about this great artist, he was just an interesting man who was a photographer and did art. I was educated along the way. Like I said, as Bob said, "I'm an acquired taste." I really started to get it, as far as how it worked together. I experimented with that; who didn't? Bob's going, "Let's collaborate on some stuff," and then we played around with some things of that sort, so he was very open about that and that was great. I don't know what else to say about it, if I've covered that for you or not.

Q: Well sure. Did that mean something you think that was reflected then in his taste in these photographs, in his selection of the photographs that he liked? You said a minute ago that he likes these photographs that are light, that are really open, and that for the most part that was the person who—

Chappell: That was Bob. That was—

Q: It reflected the person who you knew.

Chappell: Exactly. But I will say, I did a shoot about six years ago and we'd selected one or two or three shots that he liked. Well, he said, "Ed, there's someone else wanting some stuff." I said, "Well Bob, I've got these." I said, "Would you like to revisit some of these other shots I took with you about five or six years ago?" So we'd start looking. Then he'd start making a little wider selection; like anyone, as we get older, you like that photograph that was five or six years earlier, you're a little thinner, whatever. So we went through that and of course, with his stroke and everything else, the arms, the movement, he was very sensitive to that, when he had his problem with his arm.

Q: Right and I'd like to talk about that end in more detail, as we get there.

Chappell: We'll get to that. That's another thing probably that, as the years went on, after his stroke and he went through that and his inability to move an arm, it was basically like this the whole time. So I was very sensitive to that, whether it was a scarf over it or whatever else.

Q: As a photographer.

Chappell: As a photographer and as a friend. Because I knew he— There was a photographer who came down from the *New York Times* at one point and had him all out in the open like that. It is Bob; that was Bob at the time and they had him standing with this help and obviously Bob didn't like that shot. But that was the real Bob. They were trying to really portray what they needed to portray and I didn't see anything bad in it because that's how I, me and my friend— that's where he was for years and stayed like that. But at the same time, if I was photographing

him, I was more aware of that. It didn't become the most dominant part of the image. You'd maybe be able to see it in some respects, but I wouldn't dwell on that aspect. I would try to work it in such a way that I knew—because he still needed publicity photos or someone would call and want the— And in his later years he wanted fewer people to come out and photograph. Number one, “What are they going to want me to do?” And then, “Am I going to come off looking like an old man who's crippled?” He was very—we're all vain. Bob was a good-looking man and so he wanted to put himself in the best light. That's why I think we got a lot closer later on in the years; plus all the things we'd experienced together throughout the years and the travels and so forth.

Q: And so if you knew that was how he would feel, could you say a little bit more about how you would acknowledge that as a photographer—in a way that perhaps this individual who came down from the *Times* did not?

Chappell: Well, as I approached it— Remember now, I'm photographing a very good friend by this stage and I also know his insecurities and I probably have a better read on him than most people. I also know as a photographer, when you come in hired as an assignment and you're coming in to photograph on location, I know how this other photographer is trying to get the real Bob, trying to get him to do some things. I think he reluctantly agreed, to that respect, that that photographer was, very objectively, right. They come here. They see what they see, just like I would, and try to get a shot of him however—up close.

Q: Like you coming in, in '92 or something.

Chappell: He's in a wheelchair. So exactly, like me coming in '92. I don't know if that photographer or journalist was there to really try to get to know or try to get something on Bob or if they had a preconceived notion of what they tried to do, if they wanted to get a certain amount of the studio and Bob in there. You never knew what their requirements were or what the editors or the art directors were telling them to do. "We need a shot of Bob in the studio," so they'd choose what they wanted to choose. I didn't think it was a bad photograph or anything like that. I don't think Bob wanted to be seen quite in that light. We always think we look ten years younger, twenty pounds lighter, and have a hell of a lot more hair, and as we get older, that's just not the case. Do you see any mirrors in my house? No, I'm just joking.

[Laughter]

Chappell: But I have one mirror.

[Laughter]

Chappell: The only one I've got. I always show my one mirror. I want to be behind the camera.

[Laughter]

Chappell: Because I still envision myself— But no, it's like everybody, a lot of people are that way and I understood that about Bob and I tried to be sensitive to the needs. I tried to help get

images out for him that they would want, that he would want out there. We had a couple of serious shots in there later on. I did some things with some black. Sometimes I could work him a little bit more. I could push him a little bit more to get what I wanted. But at the end of the day if he didn't like it, it stayed in my archive until now, or whatever I decide to do with the images, I'll keep that in mind. You see there's a lot, there are studio shots where he's working and so forth and so I have a mix of everything. But when you were out there a lot, after a while, it's like I would take some breaks in between shooting because we were just enjoying the conversations of people that we were with, the guests. And of course the locations. Bob invited me to a lot of great locations.

I also went off and shot a few things for Bob. He had some things that had come through and he couldn't travel well in the later years. I think that Central Park [New York] had their hundred-year celebration and he was asked to put some T-shirts together [note: Rauschenberg designed a T-shirt in 2003 for the 150th anniversary of Central Park to benefit the Central Park Conservancy]. I don't know exactly what they asked him to do. Bob looked at me and said, "Look what I've got coming." He goes, "That's not my area of talent. I looked at all my stuff," he said, "I'm down—I don't get up to that part of town."

Q: Right, he's downtown, right.

Chappell: And so he was trying to pull imagery from whatever sources he could, from the archives and he goes, "I don't get up there." He said, "So what are you doing?" I said, "What do you mean?" He goes, "You want to take a little trip for me? [Laughs] And see if you can get

some shots?” I said, “I’ll try.” So he sent me up, but the problem was, they had a deadline and it was wintertime. So I’m running around Central Park in the winter trying to get some shots. I had a ball running all over the place. I think he only used a few of them, plus he used the art. It was Bob and he just—whatever resources he could get, he’d have fun with it. But that was an interesting little project to go up there and do. I’m freezing and he’s sitting in Captiva as I’m walking around out there.

I had a problem because, as a photographer, we look at things as kind of like a final image. When I’m shooting I’m thinking of cropping light and that wasn’t how his process was. A lot of times my stuff was too finished for him, if you know what I mean; something was too thought through. His compositions were a little looser; he was a little more street photography. So obviously I got a read on what he liked and I would show him some of these images that I was shooting. And because I always had it in mind, if I saw something really—“I’ve got to shoot that for Bob, he may be interested in that,” and so you would go out and shoot this stuff and think, “Oh, maybe he’d be interested.” But I learned quickly. He’d go through a book of mine and wouldn’t pick anything and say, “Thank you.” I would say, “What’s going on?” and he’d say, “Well, your stuff’s too finished sometimes,” in the beginning.

Q: So how do you respond to that? So if you have this training and this background in producing finished pieces that in and of themselves, here’s a portrait—

Chappell: Visual cropping—

Q: Ed, like you can frame it—

Chappell: Or strengthening scenes, frame it, yes.

Q: So you started going out on assignment for him because of course, I think after the stroke, increasingly he relied upon other people's photography.

Chappell: Well, he did that in initial stage too, the [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy and all the—where do you get all of that. He always was poling for something.

Q: Sure. But then there's this gap that, stemming from the lawsuit that happened I think in the mid-seventies over that diver issue.

Chappell: Yes, exactly.

Q: Right. And so I'm curious then—so it's one thing that you're coming in and you're taking these portraits of him or these shots of him in the studio, but then in some way it sounds like as you're going around and you're thinking, "Oh, Bob might find this interesting," and then in some cases you're specifically going out on a mission for him, to go shoot Central Park or something like that. And so I'm curious, I pulled this quote from him where he says, "Any time anyone leaves the house I hand them a camera . . . I never tell them what to photograph. The ones that look like something I would do I can't ever use." [Laughs]

Chappell: And that is so Bob. Remember I told you I got him into digital and then he bought six or seven cameras. That's why he bought six cameras—because the problem was people were bringing stuff back in these camera things that were so bad and the negatives— Just stuff that was so hard for Laury and them to try to make something out of. Because Bob would want a little piece out of something and technically, even with the way that Bob was doing the process, it just was a nightmare. So when Bob knew that, I got those cameras, and then you could hand one to a nurse, to Matt [Hall], to anybody.

Then he used to have good enough stuff, quality-wise, that you could start going in there. You're right, the untrained eye and the street scenes, just grabbing that—that was the interesting piece you could see. I'm a fairly quick read. I have to get rejected a few times, I'd go, "It's okay, Bob." Now I'd get lucky every now and then, "Oh, I have to have that." So remember, he rarely would take a full photograph of anything. He was looking for pieces within that. Just like he looked for the scraps on the side of the road, he was looking for pieces of that part, whether it was a photographic image or what it was. He would pick a piece of it.

Q: Using part of the photograph itself.

Chappell: Part of a photograph. Maybe it's a thin sliver of it, he'd just like this one element. And sometimes he'd just cut out that one element.

Q: Kind of collage it.

Chappell: Yes, that's part of the thing. So I understood that and as I start shooting more, it was like, "Okay, I'm not going to finish that." In other words, all my training, when I would go out to shoot for him—

Q: To frame—

Chappell: I just put out the door. I'd take a certain focal length and so I just couldn't shoot—that's something interesting, just shoot. Over the years I got a little bit better read of what he would like and Laury would too—and then you're just trying to see, not so much what he would like, but how to approach the subject matter. How to approach it, don't do that final product, don't really get in there. Get that scene. Remember, he's a street photographer. How things happened, you just—and there's a way to do that in editorial, whether I'm shooting architectural, lifestyle, there's a certain way that you can shoot things and so you try to blend yourself. I always tell people, I like to play editorial photographer because I go out there and it's whatever light grabs you, wherever you're at, fine. You can't tell that person to go do that again.

In my commercial field, if I've got a model, they may do that same scene fifteen times until I feel that we've got it right. Well, in the real world when you're doing street photography, whatever happens, you've got to be there. The light's coming through those buildings at the same time. Someone just happens to walk through it, bam, you've got to be there and be able to capture it. The same thing when you look at Bob's imagery and look at how he was a street photographer and he would just try to capture those things. I ended up quickly not composing and I'd show those photos to other photographers and they'd look at me like, "What the hell are

you shooting, Ed? What is this? There's no composition. You don't get this," and I would just laugh at them and they said, "So this is what you're doing now?" I would joke with them, I'd say, "I went out and shot. What do you think of these?" and they'd go, "What the hell is this? That's a set of tires. What did you do with this?" There's not even, "Go ahead and crop it." I would get a good laugh out of it because they didn't know that I was trying to deconstruct my eye basically and how I approached it.

Q: Take the Central Park shoot as an example. So what's the difference between the sort of instructions or non-instructions that Bob Rauschenberg would give you? Like how did you go shoot that for him versus if you'd been told for a commercial shoot, "Go shoot Central Park and Fifty-ninth Street south, the whole—"

Chappell: First of all, I probably wouldn't have done it in the winter.

[Laughter]

Chappell: There's always something happening in Central Park—you go any time of the year. Well, it's a totally different approach. I'm being a street photographer. I'm trying to keep my crops loose. Colors, shapes, some repetition, anything I see that kind of—now granted, wintertime in Central Park, there's not a lot of color going on there. So I'd hang around the museums and the street vendors, the kids. There's the ice-skating, there was some sledding, there were some architectural pieces. I'm just trying to get him footage. Anything at all, but I know that he may just like one little piece and just cut it out. Like he told me, he said, "That's not my

area,” so he didn’t have an archive like he did of the rest of New York or Venice [Italy] or anywhere else that he’d been traveling throughout the world, China; he had all these other archives. When he got up to about—what is it, Seventieth Street or whatever else, he kind of dealt it back down. Madison Avenue. That wasn’t Bob. So he really didn’t have that archive there, but they did supply him, I think, plus through the Internet and everything else, with all types of imagery that he could cut up and put through there. But as far as my assignment was, if you can’t take a—

Q: Were there instructions? Were there—

Chappell: No. [Laughs] No.

[Laughter]

Chappell: He said, “Just go.” I said, “Well, what do you want?” He said, “Just go, see what you can get. You can get something.” But I’d been working with him long enough and understood the man and where he was coming from. Like I said, I felt fortunate he used a couple of them. I don’t know what, but I would just laugh at it, when Bob offered for you to do something. “Just do it, just go through it, and it may or may not work.” We had all sorts of different projects that came up and he always had his ear open for anything coming his way, especially with the digital. Giving him that transfer process, he loved that.

Q: So you come into this world in '92 and you're there originally strictly as a photographer. You're there for the shoot. And of course what you've been describing over the course of our conversation so far is that it evolved into something much broader. If you could fast-forward ten years or something like that because I'd like to get into talking about his later years, but prior to that, what's the balance of your time? You mentioned that you'd go up there every couple of days or maybe once every two weeks or something like that and so I'm curious how much you're going there as a photographer, how much you're there as a studio assistant? How much you're there just socially or to what extent those categories lost their distinction and it became this—

Chappell: All of the above. One thing always led into another. I may have some copy work to do. We may be working on a project he needed some help on. We always were there for the meals and whoever was there. There were some times when we had the whole crew together, when a big project was going on. In the earlier days, Bob cranked out quite a bit of work. Sometimes I thought it was a competition. It was just ridiculous, it was—

Q: With who?

Chappell: With Darryl [R. Pottorf] at times. "I did ten," he'd say. "Well I did fifteen." I'm like, "Oh shit," and now this is loading 4-by-5 film. I spent so much time in the darkroom. I'd take tons of holders with me, probably twenty, thirty holders, and still have to keep going through all the imagery. So early on, the problem was that it crossed itself over from the very beginning. The very first assignment was probably the only one that I was sent there to photograph Bob. After that, I think while I was shooting that *Labyrinth* piece inside the studio, he said, "Can you get a

couple shots of me with the *Labyrinth*?” and I said, “Sure,” so we started shooting that and that ended up in a poster. And I’ve got those series somewhere, but that was it right there, all in black and everything else. And at the time he said to me, “I like the way you shoot.” I said, “Well, thank you,” and at that point I said, “Sure, I’ll shoot you in there.” So that one time I was up there, I was trying to help him because he had the *Labyrinth* assembled in there; I was trying to get some shots that he could use for a catalogue or something. They were trying to send it to him and he just wasn’t happy with what he was getting, so I did that, and then at the same time I shot him inside the *Labyrinth* and then we had dinner. And then he had all the stories from dinner. Sort of famous guests could be there at the time. He had a lot of friends stop in from different times, but—yes, it all blended together.

It was really interesting. The more you got in his world and really understood this, the more exciting it was. Naples is a very conservative town. As far as an artist, it was to me—what a release to go there with someone who was all about art. In my mind it just kept— The education was tremendous and in other words just appreciating what he did, how he did it, and the talks at night. Everything from every subject in the world ever since the very beginning, from Black Mountain [College, North Carolina] to erasing [Willem] de Kooning [*Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953]. I heard that story so many times in different ways and it was just hilarious, he’d have us all—

Q: Would it change? Or would it—

Chappell: Oh, it was probably a little more elaborate on certain things that aren't in the YouTube video or whatever. Oh yes, he would add some things, perhaps, for the public. Okay. But at the same time there's always what you say in public and then there are the backstories to everything. So there's always more to whatever the situation is. Just like working with Merce Cunningham, that dance and all of those pieces, that was—

Q: *Interscape* [2000].



Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Interscape* (2000), with set and costume design by Rauschenberg. Pictured: Jeannie Steele, Derry Swan, Maydelle Fason, and Holley Farmer. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Ed Chappell

Chappell: *Interscape*.

Q: I noticed that, yes, there are quite a few shots that you took of that performance from 2000.

Chappell: He was hilarious. He'd say, "Can you imagine being a person in charge of doing all the laundry?" Because he didn't want them to wear anything underneath. He wanted them to be naked underneath. So we wouldn't see the tan lines at first. He'd joke, "Can you imagine being the one to do his laundry every night?" We'd just sit there, he would just get you cracking up,

and it was just funny. We had just a lot of things that would come up through there. Also what was interesting about that piece is, I got to sit right next to him and watch him. I was trying to photograph it during the rehearsals, as he was trying to work with the light, what he wanted for lighting and how he wanted things going through there, and so that experience alone, that was a lot of fun.

Just being around all of that, whether it was print, sculpture, dance, art, he was all over the place, which was so exciting. When I went up, I never knew what he was going to be into next, what was coming up. Every time he called there was always another adventure, I would call it. It could be about anything.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you made the choice not to go on full-time. That that offer was made and you decided—

Chappell: I never wanted—I was never an employee of the Untitled Press [Inc. (UPI)].

Q: Right. Because earlier we also talked about how you were contacted, not contracted. So I'm interested in that in terms of what your relationship—

Chappell: I had my own business. I'd been a commercial photographer and that's how I did all of this. But the thing was, because it was so much fun going up there, I basically worked for free photographing him and obviously retaining the copyrights. He said, "They need an image, you just deal with them, they're there, so you can make—" I didn't make a lot of money, but he let

me—basically he was my subject and he would send people to me if they wanted any imagery and they'd have to deal with me, whether my contract was for a one-time usage or whatever else. So I created a nice stock house. Now, after the fact, I wish I would have shot more. Yes, different things. But when you're in the moment and there are all the different things going through there— But yes, like I said, it's one of those things. We just became really great friends. I went through the death of his mother; we went through a lot of things in his life and we just became very good friends early on. Like I said, I never went to work there as an employee, mainly because I really cherished that time, plus I had another business going on in commercial advertising. Now in hindsight, it probably would have been great, but I still saw a lot of Bob and as I told you before, I wasn't going to be special anymore. And he got it.

I'm an early morning person. I'm probably the only person other than Phillip [Woods] who did the cleaning, who was the early morning person. So I would try to stay up until 1:30, 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, but I had to wake up in the morning. I just woke up. So I'm there and everyone else is asleep. Everyone else is gone. And I have the whole place to myself. The grounds, everywhere, all the time. So I'd go get some coffee, get the newspaper, I'm setting up in the studio, looking at my film, maybe I have to download some stuff. Later on it was the digital. I'd process some of the stuff in the mornings while they were asleep. So I'd wait and go through there. But I had a lot of downtime in the mornings. That was my workflow.

I've lost track of what I was saying at this point but—it was a different process. I guess talking to all the staff—I call it the Captiva family—people would get there at different times early in the day, so then I'd hear someone come in and he'd tell me the stories of what happened this week

and who did what and what was where. It was like a *Peyton Place* [1964–69] thing. The dramas would come out during the day about who did this or what. Someone's getting this more attention. It's like—how was Bob last night? What did you guys do? I'd get that and so I'd end up becoming really good friends with everyone there. It was really interesting because you'd get all the morning scuttlebutt: no one's talking about this or that and you're talking about this and did Bob mention this? Because they didn't necessarily see him for too long during the day. He'd wind down and we had projects going at night where they were more around. But a lot of times the material was always done. The canvases were ready, set to go. I've carried my share of artwork. I'm pretty fast at picking it up and moving stuff and helping him put the canvases back on so—in a sense you can call me a jack-of-all-trades.

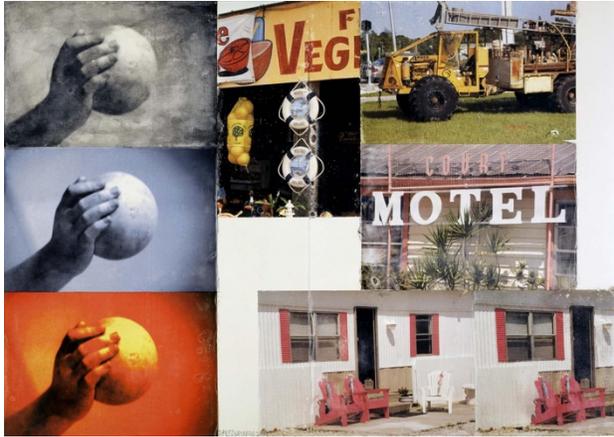
Q: So you show up and you might be there for a social reason, but lo and behold you sort of become a studio assistant for—

Chappell: You say social, yes, we had social situations and a lot of those were going to events and everything. As Bob would say, "I have to go to work." He'd say, "Why don't you come up to this or do this," and he'd say, "You can come and we'll have a good time, we'll go to this place, I'll get you to go to the dinner with us, amazing." But he'd say, "I'm working." "Oh, I know, I see." Because he had to be on. Everyone was there to see him. It was exhausting, going to all these openings. He loved it, but it was exhausting, so he'd say, "No, I've got to go to work." You've got to get yourself up and all those people you're meeting for the first time, several times. There were times when—especially as the years went on—when we would get a little wink or nod, "Ed, can you come over and save me?" kind of deal. "Can you do this?" We

would try to help, run interference a little bit, when people would get too— In some areas he was almost a little rock star. So sometimes, “Hey, Bob, can we come see you?” Or “Can you do this?” and we’d try to help break something up. “Oh, can I come see you? Someone wants to see you.” We’d try to do that. Now Darryl did quite a bit of that, but really everybody knew after a while to help him out, especially after the stroke and so forth. You can only take so much.

Q: Yes. And I’d like to talk about that further because of course he had the partial paralysis on the right side. And so I’m curious then about the impact of that event on all of this because, by that time, you’d been a part of this for ten years. You knew each other. And so I’m curious about that. Because one of the things, for example, that I heard about from some folks with the Foundation and that you actually mentioned before we turned on the recorder here, is that you would read correspondence to him and that you were very much there. So I’m curious about that event and was that a clear before and after moment in all of this? Going into those five, six years—he’s working on, I think, the *Runts*, he’s working on what, the *Scenarios* [2002–06] I think is before that.

Chappell: Yes, *Scenarios*, *Runts*. And a few things in between, there were things going on between, playing a little sculpture piece, he had a few things he was working on.



Robert Rauschenberg
Triathlon (Scenario), 2005
Inkjet pigment transfer on poly laminate
85 1/2 x 120 1/2 inches (217.2 x 306.1 x 5.1 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: So continuing our chronology and—

Chappell: Well obviously it was a huge change when that happened. My big take on all of that was I would still come up and see him a lot at the time, but he was going through a certain amount of depression. He wasn't the man he once was in the physical sense and we went through a period of, I would say, a year, a couple years, where the productivity— He was depressed. He didn't want to go to the studio as much to sit around there and you could only sit. Sure, we'd read him correspondence, we'd help him with whatever he needed help with, and he'd ask for opinions and so forth on some of the decisions that were happening at the time. But the biggest change I saw at that time was, he did lose some of the spark.

But over time, I can't pinpoint exactly when it happened, but I saw him coming back. It's like he came— He did not like having nurses around 24/7. He tolerated it; he didn't like it. But after we got a routine going and really figured out what he could do physically and working with some rehab and saw how much of his strength he could get back, we saw the Bob coming back. At least I saw the Bob come back. I'd show up there sometimes in the evening and say, "Bob, ready

to go to the studio?” “No, I don’t know,” and we had times we didn’t go to the studio. That had never happened before. So there was a period of that just, “I’m ready to go,” whatever. You can imagine the photography at that time. He didn’t really want to be photographed. I would get some things out of him from time to time and see, the thing is, I’d have to show him what I was doing and once he saw that oh yes, I was being sensitive to this or that, we tried to work some things; it was easier for him. But I don’t know exactly what the time period was or how long it was, but then he started getting back into it. Then I saw the Bob—once he could figure out a system, how many more assistants, how much more assistance did he need to get that painting done? He couldn’t physically lift up the painting anymore, but he could have us lay it down and set it there and turn it around and work with him on that and he could sit. So there were things that he could do and couldn’t do, and once I think he realized what he could and couldn’t do and then worked that out, then he was back into producing. Producing by way of going through the imagery and really starting to come back to life again, as I would say. But it took a few years.

Bob never liked to miss out on anything. He was like, “What’s going on here? What’s going on there?” It became more difficult for him to travel but we made sure that between the nurses and everyone else, that happened; that if he wanted to go there, we’d find a way to get there. There may have been some hesitations from Darryl or some of the other people, but I remember taking Bob myself out to breakfasts, taking him to downtown Fort Myers because there were a few artists going and Darryl wouldn’t want to go. I said, “Let’s go,” so we’d just go. I knew how to handle all the apparatus and would take a nurse or somebody else; he liked to be out there. He didn’t want to miss what was going on. He wanted to be out there and the people loved it.

So yes, it took a while, but then I saw the Bob coming back. When you see the man with as many issues as he was getting with his body and so forth, but still wanting to be in the studio like that and working in there— He may not put out ten paintings in a couple days, but he put two or three or four out and when he got on a roll, he'd put more out. But he did obviously slow down to some degree, just because of— But it was very easy for him to get in the studio. When you see the studio, you'll see this huge lift in there, the elevator. We used to drive all the way up into the studio, get him out, put him in the elevator, and there he went. There was not a lot of effort in there. But you'll see that tomorrow, as far as how the studio's set up and that was before he had his stroke or paralysis, whatever you want to say. It was easy to get him around; it's a big studio. So that was the good part of it.

Q: And so if Bob went through this change and then this kind of resurgence, as you're talking about, emerging from this depression, what is your sense of your own role or roles? In that world, through those changes, were you doing different things than before or—?

Chappell: Well, the part of caregiver comes into play. Even though he had nurses and everyone else, we tried to keep them at bay as much as possible, in the other room or something. So whether it was the feeding, helping him through this way, going to the bathroom, whatever. There was always, especially with a wheelchair and how to get him up in there, so yes, you became part caregiver. If you were a friend of his, you helped out with that. A close friend. So whether we went somewhere, to an opening or whatever, everyone tried to help each other. The nurses obviously were on the front line with all this. But yes, here again, by then we were just such good friends that I just enjoyed seeing him and his face always lit up. He always had that

spark, that little spark in his eye, and he talked about stuff, whether it was the art going on, the correspondence, what's going on with this, current events. He didn't exactly love [George W.] Bush and so we had a lot to talk about as far as those certain things. And he still was pretty much sought after, between all the commitments he had. One of the last trips was to Bilbao [Spain], not Bilbao.

Q: Porto?

Chappell: No.

Q: There's the Porto thing.

Chappell: This wasn't even for his work, it was for Darryl's opening.

Q: Oh yes, yes, so it's in Spain somewhere then.

Chappell: In Spain and I went over with a doctor friend and Bob didn't want to miss the show. He wanted to be there. He chartered a plane to do this. Just because it came to an important point, if it was going to a smaller city you had to be careful because if they had a smaller commuter plane, that didn't work. So he ended up doing a charter to get there because he wanted to be there. It was tough for him to do it, but he wanted to be there. I think for Darryl, as much as for—he didn't want to miss an opening. People were coming out and he was going to be there. He had a great time. I remember he had a huge party afterwards. There was a Spanish band, they

were doing all this music and Bob was right in the front row and he just had a ball. It was very difficult for him at those last stages to do that. You could see he was in a lot of pain.

Q: In an interview they did in *Harper's Bazaar* in [September] '97 he's talking about illness and he's talking about death and he says that, "I'm working on my fear of it. And my fear is that something [interesting] will happen, and I'll miss it," and so a lot of what you're talking about seems to be that he always wanted to be in the thick of it in some way. In the middle of it.

Chappell: Absolutely. Oh yes. I remember there would be times I was talking to the techs about some process or something and he'd go, "So what are you guys talking about? What's going on? What are you guys doing? Are you talking about a process? Maybe I'd like to know, what is it? What are you guys talking about? Because I may want to use it. Are you guys going to use it?" No. "What's going on?" So he was always very inquisitive, he could never get enough, as far as a new process or a new way of looking at things, even as he was getting older. I told you about the *Lotus Series* [2008], that was, I believe, his last piece, I'm pretty sure.

Q: Right, that was in the last year or two, yes.



Robert Rauschenberg
Lotus III (The Lotus Series), 2008
Inkjet pigment and photogravure on paper
45 3/4 x 60 x 1 3/4 inches (116.2 x 152.4 x 4.4 cm)
From an edition of 50, published by Universal
Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York

Chappell: I remember in the hospital they were coming up with—he did the original artwork, so that size that I showed you; and so they were making these large, probably 4-foot by 6-foot prints and we were seeing proofs come out and I knew it would give Bob a lot. I knew Bob was right in the middle of that. I would take these to him in the hospital. I think either one was at the hospital or the other one, when he finally got it. This was not his last time when he had the heart attack, but before then, when he was in a hospital briefly. And to get his spirits up, I'd bring those prints out that were sent down, because they were proofs, saying, "Is that too much magenta? How's the yellow on this one? Oh, he's not getting this right." Because he was trying to proof out the proofs for this. I would roll them out and say, "Bob, take a look at this now." He'd go through there and—so I really tried helping him get back into seeing these things, the way they were trying to work with him.

I always tried to talk about the work, get the work out there that we could start laying out and he'd get excited, "Oh, look at that one. Well, I don't know about that and what do you think about this one? That one's a little—" Of course, he always wanted them more saturated. I knew that and I'd say, "What about this one here?" He had a pretty good eye for the color going in there. And let's say you'd see two or three together and then he'd give his approval on that because that was in the very beginning of that process when they were being proofed up. It's one thing to really match up the artwork, especially for this process, because they were making them so much larger than what they originally were and they were sort of embossing that lotus flower. So that was another process that he kind of came up with, so there were lots of things to look at and then it was, how do we mount them? Do we mount them the same way as— Do we put the

wood, maybe it's a little more organic, maybe it's going with the wood frames edge on this. So he was still involved at the very end on all of those. But it really was a pleasure to pull out those old negatives and have him re-purpose them—

Q: From the China visit in '82, I think, yes.

Chappell: From the China visit, from the eighties. Because initially I don't think it was in his—he just wasn't going there at the point and so we were determined to get those things out and finally see what he thought about those and—if you get a chance, go back through them. There's some really beautiful stuff in there. I hope that answered your question there.

Q: Yes, yes, definitely. So one thing that I'd like to talk about a little bit, just as a way of talking about the dynamic that the two of you had, was if you could tell me something about reading his letters to him. We talked briefly about one anecdote, before we turned on the record here, about Rocky, but before we get to that, is that something that happened more after the stroke? Or is there something that continued throughout the whole thing?

Chappell: I think it's a combination of perhaps the stroke—he could still read and with some of us, he would say, “What do you think about this?” As we became closer and better friends, he just wanted another opinion. Remember, I wasn't there full-time. When I came, what was I? I was a little special. I was a friend coming and I came a lot more than other friends— And when he was ill, when he had the stroke, they'd call me and say, “Could you come up this Sunday evening, everybody else wants to take a little break.” I'd say, “I'd be more than happy to.” So I

would come up just to visit and hang out with Bob and I'd cook him a little dinner, we'd have something going on and so it became a friendship, helping out a friend at those times.

I guess in a roundabout way, the more he got to trust me, the more that we got time together, he could trust me to look at something and know that he'd get an honest opinion. He'd know it would stay between he and I, if he asked for it, whether it was a gallery owner he thought was asking for too much art or the letters coming back and forth that I would read and then hear other people saying, "Bob, you've got to do this." Because they need to do this, this, and this, and then Bob would say, "Well, I don't want to do this," and he'd say, "You look at it." I'd say, "Well, I can see everyone's part." But Bob didn't want to have one gallery having too much power, having too much artwork, so there were those little things going on. That was just one of the anecdotes, but there would be things coming through, some correspondence. A lot of them would be people asking for whatever charity and so there were those sort of letters and then there would be correspondence regarding some artwork. It just ran the gamut, a little bit of everything. Like I said, the one Rocky letter was just classic, it was—

Q: Would you mind sharing that on the record and incorporating it with this artifact that we have here on the table? If you could just briefly describe what it is and then—

Chappell: I am looking at a gold leaf Rocky egg. We thought Rocky was a male—Rocky was a female. About fifty some years into Rocky's life he started laying eggs. Bob didn't know what to do about it. He was pretty shocked. Trying not to get too off the charts here, but he was a romantic, hopeless romantic. He wanted to see possibly if he could find Rocky a mate and then

maybe have some little Rockys. So he had asked Matt [Magee] up at 381 [Lafayette Street, New York] if he could investigate it. To the best of my knowledge, that's how it went. I think he said, "I want this to happen." Well, Matt went to the vet and did all this research and found out that for one thing, Rocky being on a wood floor for the last thirty years or more, her gait or her legs, she couldn't quite get up high enough for turtles to mate.



Rauschenberg's turtle, Rocky, with her eggs, in his Lafayette Street studio, New York, August 2006

[Laughter]

So that was one of the issues. And then the other issue was, is she going to take to this other male? We didn't know about that. And then as soon as the eggs come out, they need to be put on some bed of grass or something soft; they've got to be under a heat lamp, they need all this time and effort, and that's even if we could get to that point. Apparently Matt had written this two- or three-page handwritten letter that Bob tossed over to me to read and he said, "Doesn't look like it's going to happen." I said, "Yes, it's going to be pretty tough." He said, "Well, I tried." So he made sure the staff at 381 sent him the eggs. So in the studio one day I'm looking at all of these little eggs.

A little bit to the backstory, I spent a lot of time at 381 through different periods with my children from the time when they were in little cribs. Bob used to ask me to come up specifically during the holidays or so forth, when Hisachika [“Sachika” Takahashi] who used to take care of the residence was out, so then I could watch over the residence. He knew I loved New York and so I would take the kids up there. They became very fond of Rocky and fed him—we thought him—quite frequently and did that for many years. Bob knew that the boys really liked Rocky, so he gold-leafed a couple of eggs and had Lawrence make this interesting little box for them and I’ve got two little Rocky—

Q: Sort of a glass display case—

Chappell: Yes, a glass display case of Rocky’s eggs. It’s kind of an interesting little thing, but Bob was a hopeless romantic. He really was hoping that maybe he could get Rocky a partner after all these years.

[Laughter]

Q: While we’re talking about this matter of you reading him these letters, so they ran from pet care or pet mating issues to, it sounds like, you’re talking about the business issues, gallery issues, dissemination of the art. Is that something that you primarily were doing? One thing I would like to talk about a little bit is this larger world that you find in Captiva. Were you a part

of the group of people who were doing these things? Or did everyone sort of have their own—
How did that shift over the years?

Chappell: Well, it shifted over the years to this because Darryl was less and less in the picture in the evenings. It would just be Bob and I. Darryl would be asleep or whatever. Darryl wasn't there. And if he was there, he wasn't there, for lack of a better word for it. Bob and I became close because he would ask me about these things because he was concerned about his friend, and he didn't have anyone to really bounce some of this off of. Now was I the deciding factor in any of this? No, I was just a friend he would talk about things with and if he wanted my input on a few things, he'd show me. Some things he wanted me to look at. Rocky, that was more of just a fun little anecdote there. But there were lots of things that just came. Now granted, he had people there taking care of it during the day and bringing us stuff, but they'd have a stack of things for Bob to read or that he needed to go through or address. Normally it would be he and Darryl who would address these things in the evenings and as the years progressed, Darryl was less and less there. Not that I was making any financial decisions, which I wasn't; he just needed a sounding board about certain things, "What do you think about this?" Because we were close friends and he didn't have his Darryl to bounce that off of. So I would try to do the best I could to help him with that. But as far as running the business or anything like that, I had no hand in that. I was just helping with the letters coming in, whether they said they were from a gallery owner or from this or that and just giving my opinion. That was pretty much it. Then he'd ask me to write some notes on some of the stuff or he'd read it and he'd say, "Can you just put a little note here to do this," or whatever. So there was a little bit here and there. I always did maybe a little bit of business or something. It wasn't all the time.

Q: And so what you're talking about is this pretty extraordinary relationship where it comes from this one photo shoot and then emerges to the point where you're spending these evenings with him. I don't know whether we've fully explored this, but it also seems that you were a part of his larger world, in the sense that you were very familiar with 381 Lafayette and that you also did some traveling with him. Are those all things that happened towards the later years in particular? You mentioned being in Spain, which I think was just in the final couple months before he died.

Chappell: If you look over all the years, it's different pieces. Remember, I got married during this. I had some children coming up, so I wasn't always as available in some of these other issues. But I was always available to be in Captiva and help him with some of this. Some things I regretfully didn't attend that I wish I had attended—especially since I'm divorced now, I should have given that up.

[Laughter]

Chappell: But when Bob called, you went up there, and my former wife had a problem with that at certain times. But I said no. In fact, the wife I eloped with, actually I eloped in Central Park in '97, the day before the opening at the Guggenheim, the big retrospective. I went to Europe for about three or four weeks with a girl I'd just met, and between France and Venice and everything else, I was scheduled to come to the opening in New York and the next thing you know we're on a plane to New York and we eloped. We got married in Central Park the day before Bob's [opening]. Bob's one thing he said to me at the time was, "Don't lose your vision." That's what

he kept telling me, but I don't know if there—it was one of those things. It happened very quickly. We dated a few months, got married, and then of course the children came, and so it kind of interplayed with the opening and all of that. It was an interesting time. They all looked at me and said, "We only met her one time." Bob said, "I didn't even know you were dating."

[Laughs] "You come back and you come married?" [Laughs]

Q: What do you think he meant by that? "Don't lose your vision."

Chappell: As far as your work.

Q: What does that mean for him?

Chappell: Even about your artwork and what you do—

Q: Like your vision, again, yes.

Chappell: Don't lose your vision, don't lose your way with that, stay focused, no pun intended. Make sure you do your work. In other words, your photography. I said, "I'll do that." Listen, my former wife had a great time dancing with Bob at different functions and everything else, but they did have an issue because I was gone quite a few nights doing the work that I was doing for him. But that's water under the bridge, as they say. But that's how Bob got to know my children and everything so well.

Q: So there's something of a family engagement that's also happening for you in the later years, your ex-wife, your kids are also—

Chappell: Well, the boys have been around Rauschenbergs for so long. I remember the first time I had them at 381, David White goes, "Watch out, they're getting close to that artwork." I said, "David, they're around that artwork all the time, they're not going to touch it." Plus I know how that one's laminated. They could pee on it and nothing's going to happen to that damn thing.

[Laughter]

Chappell: But it was interesting, David, the nervous little curator that he is, he would come down and he would always find something that wasn't registered. I don't know how he did it. I would laugh and David would be down there. David would come in, "Oh yes, I found this, this, and this." He'd say, "I'll talk to Bob." For some reason he'd find, not necessarily big paintings, but he'd find something that wasn't registered. Somehow it never got through the cracks. I'd talk to him about this and it was always interesting. David was always very meticulous about making sure everything was—and Bob believed in that. Everything first went in the big binders, every piece he did, everything was numbered and dated, especially on all the paperwork that we had to have. But for some reason, David always found something. He was a good guy and I've had a lot of fun. And of course, Gina [Guy] up there at 381 on—

Q: Yes, just saw her last week, yes.

Chappell: Give her a big hug for me. We've had a lot of times with Gina. I miss them up there. We just had a lot of fun. I would sometimes talk to Gina and everyone about issues with Bob and everything else. It would always intertwine. It was always great.

Q: New York and Captiva.

Chappell: Yes, yes. But New York used to, and I don't know if Gina and David and you guys are going to appreciate this, but you guys would come down and we're talking about, this is terrible—

[INTERRUPTION]

Chappell: As I was saying, Gina, Matt, and Thomas [Buehler], Bob sometimes would say that that they're the head office. I just have to let them know every now and then that Captiva's the head office.

[Laughter]

Chappell: We used to have some laughs about that, especially with Thomas. And Thomas, love him to death, he kept it all together as far as archiving the artwork and all the shows and all the places that he had set up. His nature is very, I don't know if it's German or whatever, but he's just very precise and dealing with a bunch of artists, that's another thing that's interesting. But we always had a great time when I saw those guys up there, as well as at different events. I was

always shipping film or they were shipping film to New York back and forth, so I did have to work with them all at different times. It was a great experience with them up there. I wish I could have spent more time, but my wife and kids and so forth. But here again, like I said, most of my work was done on Captiva.

Q: And so as we come towards a conclusion here— What we've talked about is your slow emergence into this context and the growth of your place in it. And so again, coming around towards a close, I'm curious about the more recent years. If you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about Bob passing and then the legacy since then. So chronologically you were talking about being with him in the hospital, looking at the *Lotus Series* prints and things like that.

Chappell: There were a lot of hospital stays later on. I spent a few times in the hospital with him, so it was just part of being a friend. I spent a lot of time just sitting there with him and, especially in the later years, spent a lot more time than I care to in hospitals. I know Bob didn't want to be there either, so it's just one of those things that you went through and did it. As far as the end, as the years pass, I don't know what exactly, can you elaborate more as far as that?

Q: Sure. So we've been following this thread of the relationship that the two of you had and your perspective on his work. In my research for this I came across an article from the *Naples Daily News* in which you were quoted, from May of 2008, right after he passed away, in which you mentioned that you'd seen him the Sunday prior.

Chappell: Yes, I was there at the last day before he died. I spent the whole weekend with him at Captiva when he had everything set up there. I spent the whole weekend with him. Then that Monday he passed away. So it was really touching. It was just a really tough time because he got brought back to where he wanted to be and everyone realized that Bob's not going to come back from this. The best we could do was just come to grips with it; even though all his art was around him, it was more like a hospital environment. He could talk. He would struggle to talk and we'd talk about a few things and a lot of nice things were said to each other. It was very touching, but at that point you just felt very—just having any good friend die. Even though he had lived a full life, I don't feel he was ever ready for that, especially the way that it unfolded and how it happened. He did go quickly and he had a hard time speaking at the time because of the apparatus that he had on him and so he got to pull it out and he could talk to you a little bit and go back in. Then it was more about caregiving, just being there with him, holding his hand, putting compresses on his head. It was a pretty sad time. It hit me hard and like I said, he had such a full life and had done so much, but you just hated to see him in that stage. And he didn't want to live that way any longer. There were just a lot of complications. It was a tough time.

But I'm glad I was there and got to communicate and talk with him, and he and I shared some moments. What a way to end it. No one wanted it to end. I think Bob thought he would live for another twenty, thirty years, seriously. I don't think he thought that far ahead. He was so much into the moment, but it's amazing, he was so resilient after so many of these other incidents happened that put him in hospitals; he would just come back. This is one that he couldn't come back from. And so it was tough. We'd talk to the nurses and you knew what was going on and so it was tough. I know it was tough on Christopher [Rauschenberg] and everyone else too because

it was sort of sudden. It had gone on for a little while, he was in the hospital in a coma and all this, but it was tough and I felt bad for Christopher towards the end there.

Just to let you know, we had so many great conversations about Christopher. He was so proud of his son. We didn't really talk about this, but one of the first times, when I started to get to know Bob, he said, "My son, he's a photographer." I said, "Yes?" He said, "Yes, he's an art photographer." He gave me, and I still have, his book on his panoramas. He had a couple of them in there and he said, "You can have this." Whenever he talked about Christopher, his eyes would light up. I didn't get to spend that much time with Christopher, just at openings and sometimes when he was in Captiva, but he was at Captiva visiting his dad so it wasn't like we were talking about his work. I know they collaborated on some pieces because I photographed it after the fact, and we'd hear the stories and so forth, and so I know them to some degree, just as well as I know Janet [Begneaud, née Rauschenberg] his sister, all the stories that he had about both of them. But no, it was one of those things, I could tell the love for his son; he was very proud of his son and he did look forward to his visits because he would tell me that he was coming and that they were going to work on things. So I just let Christopher know that that was one thing that I knew, he was very proud of his son.



Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg,
Captiva, Florida, 2000s. Photograph
Collection. Robert Rauschenberg
Foundation Archives, New York.

As far as the passing, it's such a whirlwind. I was supposed to go meet with him in Washington, D.C. That's where he had his heart attack. I was getting ready to go up there and I was up there actually and I got to see him and the next thing you know, I found out that night that he'd had it. I was up at the hospital that next day and spent most of the time up there with him until they— The night shift people were there and I came in during the day and Bob was in a lot of pain at that time, but he was in much better spirits, but that's— Getting him back to Captiva, I talked with the doctors and with the staff and everyone else to help try to get that because they wanted to bring him back. He was in pain but he was doing much better, but from there it just snowballed and got worse.

Yes, I still miss him to this day. But what an opportunity that I just kind of stepped into. I photographed in, from one thing to the next. One thing is about just being open to new adventures and so forth. Yes, he taught me to see so many things. Also just to have such a man who cared for so many people and about artists. I can't tell you how many stories about how he helped someone to pay the rent for this or for doing this. He really was about helping people in need. I could really see that. He had a heart of gold.

Q: Well of course, there's the Foundation, there's his legacy. But there are also these individuals and clearly you're still in touch with some of them. You're still in touch with Gina. There are these people who were—

Chappell: Yes. I always told everyone, when Bob died I lost my job. [Laughs] Basically, in a way, I was telling everyone, in hindsight, because he had asked me to do certain things and we always thought he was going to live forever. And I'm regretting that I didn't get involved in the later years a little bit more to help him because there were things going around that I didn't approve of and I didn't like what was happening to him. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty; I wish I'd been more involved but—

Q: Is that something you'd like to talk about on the record?

Chappell: Not at this time. There's just so much there because that brings up a whole other—
The undercurrent for all of this is the fact that Darryl Pottorf and all of those issues and the staff and the Foundation and—

Q: The ongoing suit around—

Chappell: The ongoing suit and to be honest with you, greed's not a pretty thing to watch. It just isn't. It's as simple as that. I know all the parties involved. I've seen the back ends and there was a lot going on through that whole time that obviously we didn't mention. It's a shame to see certain people take such advantage and it's a tough one to handle and the fight between the trustees and the Foundation, I don't even know where to begin with that. I'm just disgusted, appalled. I know Bob would never have intended for this to happen this way, on many levels, regarding how everything went down. I think he trusted people to take care of his wishes and they didn't fulfill them.

Bob was never one to write down a lot of stuff. He conversed, he had an agreement, and this would be taken care of, he knew that. And that was probably to his detriment at the end. There was a certain amount that was in writing, there was a lot that wasn't, and there were people who knew better and should have fulfilled how it would happen. But without getting too much into it, that's a whole other state. It's just very sad that people who knew him so well would take advantage of this situation. Because I can assure you, Bob would never have intended the way a lot of things went down.

I feel for Christopher. He was handed something that was a mess. Just plain and simple, it was a mess. And what he's done to pick up the pieces and to put the Foundation together, is it exactly the way Bob would really have wanted it? Who knows? But he's done the best he could to get the people together. To have to deal with certain people within the organization—the trustees and Darryl and all that—I commend them on how they've done, because you just—I don't know how much history you have with Darryl or if you know any stories from Darryl Pottorf.

Q: Personally, no, I've not.

Chappell: But the thing is, it's one of those things that is just a tragedy. Someone who should have been taking care of Bob in the later years, he didn't. And what they try to claim and what they think they're entitled to, Bob would never have been any part of any of that. He would have kicked them all out the door. He would not have put up with that. I applaud the Foundation for coming in there and, not having some of the brain trust, people who knew him, who he trusted

and wanted to carry out that vision, they couldn't get that. They had to go and they've had to fight certain aspects of this from the beginning.

Obviously there's not much I could do at this point. All I could do was sit back and if anyone wants my help, I've offered it and to give my opinion on whatever else, but the trustees have kind of made their own bed as you can see from the lawsuits. Yes, the stuff I was hearing early on, I just was appalled and I've pretty much divorced myself of any connection with the Pottorf, Darryl, for about seven years. And through the early years, during the transition, Captiva was involved to some degree, but you could only take so much and then finally I couldn't take it anymore, so I had to say no more phone calls. I just had to divorce myself from that situation.

Q: So you have some distance now.

Chappell: Oh yes, for years. I pretty much told them how I felt and that I just couldn't.

Q: So for you, if there's been all this contestation over this legacy and all these people behaving in these different ways, when you reflect on not just Robert Rauschenberg the artist, but your friend Bob, what does it mean to you to have known him? How do you hope to carry forward, having known him? In your own way. You're not a part of these proceedings in the sense that you have this distance, as we've just discussed, but clearly there's been an impact, it seems to me. This was a very significant thing for you and I'm curious then what does it mean for you when you think about the legacy?

Chappell: Well at some point, I think I've said this before, the dust settles. As far as for me, or how I can help with his legacy or how—

Q: What are your hopes? Yes.

Chappell: My hopes are, one of the things is granting this interview and anything I can help with, as far as my knowledge of what went on, the stories, I'm open right there to help the Foundation in any way possible as far as keeping that legacy. Right now they have enough on their plate and things that they've been trying to start from scratch—the artists in residence program [Rauschenberg Residency, Captiva], all these other things they're doing. It is the heart of Bob, I think. Anyone can argue, “You're not doing it that way, it should be this way,” or whatever else. I call that noise. I think Christopher's got the intent down in what Bob was trying to do. What a huge job.

Then you've got the art and you've got the legacy of all the art. It's a huge undertaking. At this point in time, from what I can see, they're trying to move this up, between the oral histories and there was a book project of his photographs that I kind of worked on briefly behind the scenes [*Robert Rauschenberg Photographs 1949–1962*, 2011]. Those had to be digitized and I was helping Laury and them when they were still involved in this stage, just getting these ready. Because remember, everything they were doing up there, a lot of that was not trying to make things look the best, but trying to deconstruct some aspect of it. So I was helping with my background.

I remember meeting with Christopher up there because how did Bob want that negative to look? The printing capabilities back then in the fifties, reproduction in the fifties, compared to what they are to this day, you could have that same image and it could look three or four different ways. Many a voice, we could pull out the blacks in that a little bit more, we could make this look a little bit—photographically. So there was a conversation about how do we do this? I remember showing Christopher—and that’s a big question—“What would Bob want?” Bob always wanted the newer the better, but if he could make something better he would do that. In other words, cool if you could do that, then yes, let’s do that. But at the same time, when you’re looking at an archive image that was made in the fifties and it was printed a certain way, who gives us the right to make it something? In other words, who wanted to pull out the shadows a little bit more and bring the highlights or something—it may alter it some way. We saw something different that wasn’t there before. You follow me? So do we try to make it the way it was printed exactly then? Or because the tonalities are so much better now and we have a greater tonal range, do we play with that? I remember those little conversations when Christopher was there. So that was an interesting little piece, at the beginning to help him with a little bit. And then the guys were trying to proof these and send them up to New York and then they’d go back and forth and that. So I did help the guys just with the printing material and the type of paper to print it on, just to see what’s the best proof. Then of course, it was up to whomever to start making those decisions. But it was fun in the very beginning. Now it’s probably the last little piece that, after Bob had died, I got to have my little fingers on.

But getting back to where you see the Foundation and everything else. They’re going to figure it out as they go along. I think they’re doing a great job, especially with what they were given. The

mess. You couldn't even deal with the president of UPI. You couldn't have coherent conversations with this individual. I don't want to get too much into it, the parties know exactly what I'm talking about, but for what they had to deal with and what they were left with, I think they've done a great job.

Q: And so then for you, once the dust settles and you think about Bob Rauschenberg and what carries forward, what's the core for you? What do you hope it is that remains or persists beyond?

Chappell: Persists in a sense of—?

Q: Well, you talked about this artists in residence program as being something that was perhaps very in line with his interests and his intentions and if right now there's all this dust being kicked up with the lawsuit, all these things that are going on— Once that dust settles, if there's some resolution, what do you carry forward from having known Bob Rauschenberg and what do you hope it is that endures through all of this conflict?

Chappell: Well, I think the Foundation's doing that now. They're getting a Residency in process. Bob always liked helping struggling artists, whether it was paying their electric bill, their rent, whatever else, he wanted that. He talked about those issues going through there. So that coming forward, that's huge, that's one of the core issues about helping struggling artists. And then how can you manifest on that? Obviously, the artists in residence, but you have a huge property. People didn't know what to do with Captiva. People from New York, those places, a lot of them just wanted to sell everything off. I'd heard all kinds of rumors. Because it's a vast piece of

property and it's not exactly right on Main Street. It takes a little effort to get to it. It used to really be an effort, but now they can fly in and out of RSW [Southwest Florida International Airport, Fort Myers]. But the point is, they had this huge piece of property with several studios, quite a few homes, residences, and all these cool little places, great jungle, Bob's little jungle. What do you do with all that? Just physically, the monies involved in Florida real estate and the timing and they have all those issues to deal with. They have 381, they have the other, they have all of that stuff going through there. So it was a big study because it's a big expense. What part do you keep of Bob? Do you keep his original home and his original studio? Do you do the new studio? The new home actually got willed to Darryl, but there are all these little—there was a lot involved with it and it's a huge expense. Do you keep it going with all that expense? Is that really in the best interests of utilizing those funds? What do you do? So they have a lot of things to contend with. Then also to get the vision of what they want to do and that's why they have a board, that's why Christopher's chairman of the board.

What I really feel as the biggest loss is the fact that Darryl was with Bob so long and they had so much ongoing trust, they had so much more than I or anyone else would have, as far as his wishes and everything else, and that disintegrated before our eyes in the last few years of Bob's life. That's another reason why I became so close to Bob. Because he needed a friend. He didn't have it. Darryl was just all over the place. So it was tough seeing it. He felt bad because it was just a really tough situation. It was kind of like a married couple, if you sided with the wife one day or then sided with the husband. I'm not saying there was a husband/wife relationship but there was a bond there. And sometimes I could see earlier on where if they got in an argument and you sided with one or the other, then the other one would be mad. You couldn't win because

then they'd both be. You sat there; it was a no win. I sat with them and said, "Oh, you guys want me to argue? You guys are in an argument." This is early on, I said, "I'm not stepping in the middle of this because the next day you're going to be mad at this guy," and then with this guy and they'd have to work it out. But there was a lot going on. I know I've just scratched on the surface of all of that. That was probably the most tragic thing, as a friend.

Bob and I had talked about the issues that his friend was gone basically. He was there but he wasn't there. This is a person who was responsible for business decisions. It was scary. That's why we were talking about business issues, to get some feedback. I wasn't there every day, so it was a tough situation, but I thought he had good people around him. And then you see, well, he didn't have good people around him. That's why the lawsuit's there and like I said, greed's not a pretty sight and it's not really the intent of what he was going through there. Like I said, I was privy to a lot of information and I said after a while I just had to step back from it because there's not much I can do in that respect. There just really wasn't much I could do.

I commend Christopher to everybody, from what they've had to do to pick up the pieces and get this going and to battle what they had to battle. It's been really tough and that's why I say when the dust settles, as far as what I would see going over the Foundation; everything else, I'm not involved in any of that. I told you, I lost my job when Bob died. If I'd thought about it earlier maybe I would have gotten a little bit more involved. But we all thought Bob was going to live another twenty years. He was ready to. He was still feisty and sharp and doing all that. But it is what it is and like I said, I commend them for what they've done so far with as much guidance as

they could. I'm glad that Christopher's at the helm. They're going to get through it and they've got a vision obviously and that will evolve, I'm sure.

Obviously, in the future, if there's any way that I could be a part of it, I would in a heartbeat. But under the right circumstances, right now they're still just trying to get this together. Perhaps an oral history would have been great to do a couple years after Bob died. Do you understand? We had talked about that before. Bob and I were going to get together and do a book on my images. There are all sorts of stories. We don't have enough time to go through it, but one of the reasons I catalogued is that he wanted to put some order to it because he was thinking well, "Maybe we can do a book together, Ed, maybe use your images, I'll use some of my art, we'll put something together," but that didn't happen. There just wasn't—he passed away. He was always looking to the future, looking at the next thing to do.

The dust will settle. They've got a vision of what they want to go through and I look forward to seeing what they do. I'm on the website. I'm on the email list. When everything comes up I get to see it. That's why I knew about those—it was kind of nice to go see David and see those first oral history interviews. It was interesting. And I'm only one person that spent X amount of time with Bob. There are so many other stories out there. One of the biggest things is that I wish I had a damn recorder with me during the—you always think, that's one thing visually, but just to think of all the stories that would come up, that would start a conversation about this or that, or you'd ask about. I just wish that I'd had a recorder going on at the time.

Q: And hopefully we're getting some of that with this project, not in the same way—

Chappell: Not in the same way. No, I'm glad you guys are going through with the oral history because there are so many other people and I wish other people who were close to Bob would come up and do this. I've talked to several of the other people involved who were close and I hear stories, "Well, I don't want to give my story away." I said, "Can you possibly give your story away in two hours? Come on." How many things can you tell? If you really loved the man, put everything else aside and just talk about the man. Don't talk about these issues or those issues. We don't want to talk about it, that's the conversation I've had with several other people: just talk about why you love that man, how he influenced you. Just talk about that. You don't have to get into all the other stuff that came up.

Q: Right. And I think we've done a lot of that today. And I think, by way of closing, here we are, you have this bin full of these photos and so you still have all these photos. You're still doing photography.

Chappell: Yes, I am still employed.

Q: Yourself. [Laughs]

Chappell: Self-employed. I've never had a job since I got out of college. As I tell everybody, I'm unemployable.

[Laughter]

Chappell: I am. Yes, I still have my business, but I always say, what a great side job that was. Sometimes it's hard for me to grasp. Now when I went to the Met with him, Bob was in his wheelchair and would probably start stuff like this. I'm sure that he would start remembering things. He had the big one at the Met. When was that? In—I can't—but I remember him coming to it with the wheelchair. He looked at me as we were going up in there and he goes, "They usually reserve this for you when you're dead. I actually get to come see this one while I'm alive." He always knew he wasn't considered a master. He goes, "When you get this, usually by the time you get to here, you're not here to enjoy the party." That was the works from the fifties. That was a major endeavor, to get all those works in there.

Q: Right, the big Combine [*Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2005–06].



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York.

Chappell: Combines and all that and—

Q: Maybe '05, yes.

Chappell: I still remember that night, going up there with him to the opening. His big comment was, he said, “Ed, they usually save this for after you’re gone.” So he was very proud of being actually considered a master and being at the Met with all those people. So that was a really proud moment, I remember now. That was a special time for him.

Q: Beautiful. So thank you so much for your time, Ed, for sitting down and for sharing your stories at such depth and length. And before we go, is there anything else that you’d like to say? That’s a beautiful close that you just gave, but if there’s anything else, of course—

Chappell: I think I’ll leave it at that because there may be another time I have more to say or you may want to hear more. And we’ll just keep it open for that. As I said, it’s hard in a two-hour or however long we went; there are just so many stories. What gets me is when I start putting the visuals together, then things will pop up, just as I did at the end there. So if they’re interested in doing another round at some point or if there’s something specific, I’d be more than happy to help out anywhere I can.

Q: Excellent.

Chappell: Okay?

Q: Great. Thank you so much.

Chappell: You're welcome.

Q: With that we'll close off this record.

[END OF INTERVIEW]