ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Tim Pharr

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Tim Pharr conducted by Sara Sinclair on February 17, 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: Tim Pharr | Location: Captiva, Florida

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair | Date: February 17, 2015

Q: Today is February 17, 2015. This is Sara Sinclair with Tim Pharr in Captiva, Florida. To begin, maybe you could just tell me a little bit about where and when you were born, and some of your early memories.

Pharr: I was born in 1950 in north Georgia, just northeast of Atlanta. It's the suburbs of Atlanta now. It was the sticks back then. I moved to Florida in 1963 with my family and lived near Tampa, in a little town called Plant City, where the strawberries come from. Lived there through high school. Went to college in Tampa. Then moved down here in 1973 to Captiva Island. I'd met a guy in Tampa who was going to school there as well, who grew up here on the island. His family had a business here and he had lived here since he was four or five years old, so he had a very unique upbringing here. His father had epilepsy and was required to get out of the business or needed to retire because of the stress of the business. I came down with his son with the intention of taking over the business and running it down here. That didn't work out, but I stayed and became self-employed as a carpenter and worked primarily on Captiva Island for quite a few years after that.

I think I probably first met Bob during the first year that I was here. The company where I was working—with anticipation of taking it over—was a maintenance company, property

maintenance, and we did all sorts of plumbing and electrical repair work, painting repair work, carpentry, all kinds of stuff. Yard maintenance. We had a maid service. It was a complete property maintenance business and I have an idea that I probably met him initially making some sort of a service call to his house, the house on the Gulf [of Mexico]. I don't recall what it was for. But ultimately, after that didn't work out and I was working on my own, he called me, or [Robert] Bob Petersen, who lived there at that time, called me. They wanted to put new windows in the house. I was working there putting new windows in his house and he got a call from the Fort Worth Art Museum [now the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas]. They were having a show of Texas artists and they claimed him. I guess Louisiana claimed him as their native son and so did Texas. Texas claimed him as a Texas artist so they were asking if he would do a piece for the show.

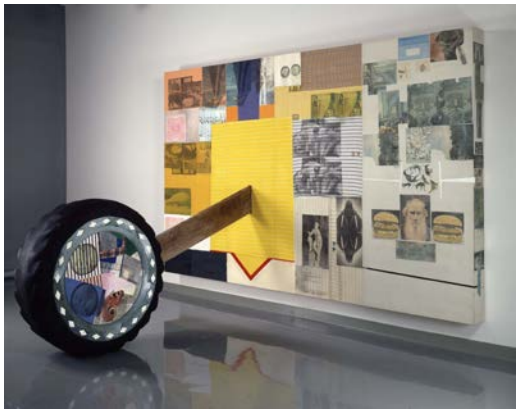
My memory is that he wasn't interested in doing it. I don't know if he talked to his dealers in New York or maybe he just didn't see any purpose in doing it so he wasn't particularly interested. But, if I remember correctly, the way things worked out, he woke up either the next morning or very shortly after that and he had the name of a painting in his head. It was *Rodeo Palace* [*(Spread)*, 1976]. What he envisioned with this painting, as he described it to me, was a series of panels that were fairly tall, 3 or 4 feet wide, and that they would come apart, but you could assemble them together and make a painting, a big painting. I think the initial one was probably something like 12 or 16 feet long and maybe 10 feet tall or so. Also there would be these doors that you could open and close—he described to me what he had in mind and he asked if I could build the structural frames for these paintings. You wouldn't see them. They'd be behind the paintings so that they could be taken apart and transported and then bolted

together. So he sketched me out—unfortunately I probably don't have that sketch—he sketched me out the layout that he wanted for this: how many panels he wanted and where he wanted doors in them. He had some old doors, a screen door and some other old doors, either under the house or under the studio or someplace, and he showed me which of the doors he wanted to use. Then he asked me if I'd build the framework, put all this stuff on. That was the beginning of my probably four- or five-year involvement with what he was doing.

Robert Rauschenberg
Rodeo Palace (Spread), 1976
Solvent transfer, pencil, and ink on fabric and cardboard, with wood doors, fabric, metal, rope, and pillow, mounted on foam core and redwood
144 x 192 x 5 1/2 inches (365.8 x 487.7 x 14 cm)
Collection of Lyn and Norman Lear, Los Angeles

He began a series with that painting and he did submit it to Fort Worth Art Museum for the show and I took it out there and installed it [*The Great American Rodeo*, 1976]. That was the first time I'd ever done anything like that so it was quite a unique experience. The series, I think he called *Spreads* [1975–83] and *Scales* [1977–81]. I worked building those frameworks for paintings for, I don't know, the next three years, four years. Something like that.

Robert Rauschenberg
Earthstar Express (Spread), 1979
Solvent transfer, fabric, acrylic, glass, brush, clock, crushed aluminum can, and reflector on fixed and movable wood panels
79 1/8 x 74 inches (201 x 188 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg
Hog Heaven (Scale), 1978
Solvent transfer, fabric collage and acrylic on wood panels with collaged and painted tire and wood plank
84 x 133 1/4 x 92 inches (213.4 x 338.5 x 233.7 cm)
Mr. and Mrs. Richard S. Lane

Q: Well, before you continue, tell me about that installation trip.

Pharr: I don't remember a whole lot about it. I guess one of the most memorable things was that—it'll sound kind of trite and stupid, but—I had never worked with someone who had the kind of acclaim and respect that he had as an artist. Wherever I went, they treated me like he was there. I was basically a country boy from north Georgia so it was a very different kind of experience for me. I didn't deal with it really well. I'm not a particularly outgoing or gregarious kind of person so I didn't capitalize on the experience very much.

I enjoyed my time there and I enjoyed the exposure to the kind of people who were there. I couldn't tell you the names of the other artists in that show. I remembered for a while, there was one guy—all of his painting was done with cotton balls. He stuck them on canvases. I can almost remember his name, but I can't quite. There was a photographer who—he was handicapped in

some way and I can't remember exactly what his handicap was, but he basically rode around as a passenger in the car and stuck his camera out the window and took pictures. Just whatever his camera happened to get. Then he developed these pictures and some of them were really quite remarkable in many ways and some of them, you'd look at it and go, well I don't even know what that's a picture of. Why is that in the show? Just very different, very interesting people. I don't have an art background at all. I didn't know who Robert Rauschenberg was until I came here to this island. I had never heard his name or, if I'd heard it, didn't attach any significance to it.

Going out there was fun. My wife went with me. We drove a truck out to take the painting and the two of us were out there for a few days. I don't remember how long. And, of course, we were entertained. We were taken to dinner. We were involved in whatever parties were associated with the opening at the museum and it was a very enjoyable, unique time. I remember going to restaurants to eat. I remember buying a hat because you had to have a hat if you were going anywhere in Texas. You had to have a hat, at least by those folks' standards. And, it just occurred to me, there was a woman whose name I can't remember—

Q: Who worked at the museum?

Pharr: I think she was probably more a patron of the museum. I can't say for sure. I know that her father, if I remember correctly, was very wealthy and involved somehow in maybe TV production or—I can't remember. I don't remember exactly. Someone else might remember. I want to say her name was Anne, but I can't—

Q: Yes, there is an Anne. I interviewed a woman named Anne Livet.

Pharr: That would be her.

Q: Yes, so she worked for the museum.

Pharr: Oh, she did work for them.

Q: She did. Yes. What are you remembering about her?

Pharr: Nothing. She was attractive. She was a very outgoing, very charming person. I don't remember a whole lot else about her. She was involved—she was very enthusiastic about Bob and his work and she is probably the one who either initiated the call or made the call to him, to invite him to be in the show.

Q: Yes, that's right.

Pharr: In retrospect—I don't know that for certain. I don't remember a whole lot more about that.

Q: Were you given specific instructions about—this is the first time you were installing a piece.

Pharr: No, not that I recall.

Q: Interesting.

Pharr: I relied on the staff at the museum for their input as far as that was concerned. Even though I don't remember him being there, I presume that Bob was there for the opening night, but I don't specifically remember him being there for that. He may not have been. It might have been too small potatoes for him. I don't know. [Laughs]

Q: Okay, so then you come back to Captiva and what happens next?

Pharr: I don't remember any particulars about what happened next other than that apparently, in the process of building this painting, he had determined that he wanted to continue in that line. I guess we came to some sort of agreement as to what our relationship would be and essentially, I was always self-employed when I worked for him. I wasn't on the payroll. I wasn't on staff. I billed him regularly for my work. There was no particular—it was just an hourly rate. There were no estimates and nothing of that sort, just working whenever I needed to in order to get the projects done that had to get done. I presume that, based on how that piece was put together, there was an overall plan about the approach to doing this. They may still do them the same way, I don't know. I know that other people who came after me certainly improved the process in many ways, to avoid some of the pitfalls I was trying to deal with.

I worked in wood. I'm a carpenter. I always worked in wood. I'm not a welder and I'm not a metal fabricator or anything of that sort. Lawrence [Voytek], who came after me, I'm sure that

working with the metal aspect of it he had his own set of problems, but using the metal probably solved some of the issues that I had with the work. Essentially the process that developed—do you want me to go into that at this point?

Q: Yes.

Pharr: We used what I call door skins. Doors of this type here. This one may not be. This is probably a solid core door, but they have an 1/8-inch skin on each side that's fairly smooth and we bought the door skins by the bunk, probably, I'm guessing, two hundred or so in a pallet. His assistant, his printer at that time was Peter Wirth. Periodically Peter would come over to the studio and he would roll out paper on the floor or something. He'd lay a whole bunch of these door skins out and he'd get a roller and he would put gesso on them. He'd put a coat on the back and flip them all over and then two or three coats on the front to prep them for the image transfer, which he was doing at that time over in the print shop. Just across the street here, from this studio, was where they had the print shop set up in the garage of the old house there.

They did image transfer at that time primarily from magazine photographs. That had to change down the road a little bit. Frequently in the afternoons—Bob's mornings but other people's afternoons—I would see him standing at the counter in his kitchen. He would be ripping pages out of magazines. He'd just be flipping through them and ripping pages out and Bob Petersen would collect them, whatever he ripped out, and put them in folders and they would end up over in the print shop. As he was working he'd be looking through images to find what he wanted to put on his canvas, so to speak. Those gessoed panels were the canvas that he worked on.

He did the image transfer. Using matte medium, he glued down a lot of fabrics for color. If I remember the process correctly, he would most often put the fabrics on first with matte medium, to get the colors, and then do the image transfer on top of that after it dried. He and Peter worked nights primarily. Depending on a lot of different things, they would start to work about dark or anytime between there and midnight and then work until—I don't know. Three, four, five, six o'clock in the morning. He worked nights almost always. They did that image transfer and then at the same time as they were doing that part of it and prepping those panels, doing all the artwork on the panels, I was building the frames that they were going to be mounted on.

My shop was over underneath the old studio. That's where I built everything. Then I took the frames upstairs and when they were completed with them, they would bring them over, and I would glue them down to the frames and then they'd be assembled and put on the wall. Sometimes they would hang on the wall for quite a while because Bob—he would come and look at them in the afternoons a lot of times. He would come over and look at them hanging on the walls because they weren't really done. As far as I was concerned, only he knew when they were done and when they weren't done. Sometimes they would hang there for a while. Sometimes even, one would go from there over to the house where it was hanging on the wall at the end of the living room and he spent a lot of time looking at them. Eventually he would do something—or not—and say it's done. He didn't quite say it that way, but it would be done.

Typically he was preparing works for a show either at Sonnabend Gallery [New York and Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris] or at [Leo] Castelli gallery [New York] or going out to, at that

time, it was [Douglas] Doug Chrismas's gallery out in Los Angeles [Ace Gallery]. He would work on a number of pieces. I didn't know what went on behind the scenes about how many pieces he had to get done or what exactly they were asking for or any of that part of it. I just knew that I had to build frames for a certain number of panels. Typically they were all fairly close to the same size. Sometimes there would be smaller ones. That was the process, as far as that was concerned.

There were times when he would draw a sketch. If he had something particular in mind, especially that required some engineering, he would draw me a sketch and say that this is what he wanted to do and ultimately, my job was to figure out how to make it come out the way he wanted it to. If he wanted a plank sticking out of the middle of a panel with a tire hanging from it and this panel had to just hang on the wall [*Hog Heaven (Scale)*, 1978], then my job was to figure out how to make that work structurally and also so it could be handled and dismantled for shipping and all that sort of stuff. I guess I was what you might call an engineer on his projects, to that extent. It was truly a unique work experience for a carpenter.

Q: Do you remember some of the more challenging tasks that you were given?

Pharr: Well, not exactly. Obviously, the ones that were more sculptural in nature had more dimensions to them. The biggest challenge in every circumstance was the fact that we were mounting a skin panel—and this is strictly engineering, this is not aesthetic or anything else; we were mounting a skin panel to a relatively light framework. The frameworks were maybe an inch and three quarters thick and when you do that, that panel will almost always want to bow toward

the side the panel is on so the frame doesn't lie flat. Or ultimately, the painting doesn't lie flat. You go to hang it on the wall, you may get it back tight at the top and then because of the curvature of the bottom, it's off the wall 3 inches and it doesn't look very appealing hanging like that. Some of them would warp more than others and then you've got to bolt them together at the center and then making them come into alignment was always difficult.

Studio assistant Tim Pharr working on Rauschenberg's *Narwhale (Scale)* (1977) in the Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, 1977. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

So my challenge, actually from day one to the end of the time I worked there, was coming up with ways to try to keep the panels lightweight, keep them easy to handle, keep them where they're easy to assemble. That was one of the nice things about them. You could take panels as long as this wall here—you may have six panels that would comprise a painting and it took two people, one on the front and one on the back and you stand them up to put two side by side. There are matching holes in them. You slide a bolt through it and put a wing nut on it, tighten it up. You go right down. You've got maybe five bolts and you just go right down the line and bolt them all together and you've got the whole painting standing there leaning against the wall and it's very light, easy to handle. You lift it up and set it on the hangers and so it's a simple process.

The heavier you make them, the more difficult that is. I tried a lot of different things. I tried putting a panel on the back as well as the panel on the front. Most walls in most museums and galleries are not very flat. You certainly find out how flat they are not when you have a panel on the back as well as a panel on the front because it tends to rock on any bump on the wall. That didn't work very well, plus it made it quite a bit heavier. Then I had to box out areas on the back so that you could still get in and put the bolts in because it just made it a lot more complicated to do. Ultimately, I came up with a method of making a frame within a frame so that the outside frame was rigid and the inside frame was made in pieces so the panel could shrink and expand and not bend the wood. It was kind of a—

Q: Tell me more. Tell me what you mean. I'm trying to see it in my mind.

Pharr: I may have to—I draw it better than I can tell it. [Laughs] You can't hear the drawing.

Q: No, but you can. Here. Does it help you, say, to draw and talk at the same time?

Pharr: Well, possibly. Basically, these frameworks were made. The standard size for a door skin was 3 feet by 7 feet, so that sort of became the basic dimension for these panels. So they're 7 feet tall and they're 3 feet wide. Typically, the outside members are 1-by-2s, which are 3/4 of an inch thick and an inch and a half wide. So you have a 1-by-2 down each side, a 1-by-2 across the top. Then I would put intermediate ones. I'll just draw maybe three or four in here. There probably were more than that, but I would have intermediate ones. And then this panel was just glued on here. I don't remember what kind of glue we used, probably some sort of panel adhesive. We'd

put a little bead of glue on the surface of all these pieces, all the way around, across the center. We would lay the panel on it and I had some steel bar stock, inch and a half square. I had it cut into pieces about a foot long and we would lay those pieces on the surface of this, continuously around it so that it would weigh it down across the center. I don't remember how many pieces I had, but we would put all these weights on it, just to hold it down flat while the glue dried. Doing it that way, it all worked great and looked great, except the panel warps toward the face. So ultimately, what I came up with was a method of making these panels so that in here I would have another short piece that interlocked with this one. In other words, if you looked at it like a section through here, the outside piece was built like this and then the inside piece was built like this. So it was sort of a tongue in groove situation, so that those two pieces could lock in together.

Q: Snap in.

Pharr: But this piece, the short piece, could move. The long piece stayed the way it was and had the tongue on it and then I'd have another little short piece in here and another little short piece in here and so forth down the other side as well and then, I think, probably another piece across the top and a piece across the bottom. I don't remember how I did the pieces in the center. Probably a similar situation. But then instead of putting the glue on this outside piece, I put the glue on the inside piece, the short piece. So the panel was glued to the short pieces, so when the panel shrunk, the short pieces could move and the panel wasn't locked rigidly to the rigid frame, so it didn't attempt to bend it.

Q: Okay. Got it.

Pharr: That was the culmination of my [laughs] engineering experience and ultimately, I can't remember if the vast majority of them ended up being done this way. I tried several different things and that worked as well as any. Like I said, once Lawrence started doing it with the metal tubing, I think his tubing was probably close to the same size, but it's a lot more rigid and resists the drawing effect of the panel—when the panel shrinks and expands, it resists that a little bit more, and he probably didn't have as many problems. Or he may have had a different way of doing it altogether. I don't know.

Q: You mentioned earlier that there were some glitches that you tried to overcome. Is this what you were referring to?

Pharr: That's one of them. Yes.

Q: What are some of the other ones?

Pharr: I guess some of the other ones had as much to do with materials. All of it had to do with materials and how to work with the materials to get them to work in the situations we wanted them to work in. When I worked with him, he got a little bit fascinated with some reflective colored aluminum sheets, bright colors that were very reflective. Also some reflective acrylic sheets as well as—one of these paintings was hanging around here when I came for the wake—sort of a brushed stainless steel-looking, plastic laminate. It was actually a very, very, a micro-

thin layer of stainless steel adhered to plastic laminate. Working with that was always a challenge.

I remember, for one painting in particular, he wanted a section about 3 feet wide across the middle of this one panel to be these colored acrylic sheets. If I remember right, it was acrylic. It might have been the aluminum, but it seems like it was the acrylic. The acrylic sheets were maybe an eighth of an inch thick and they were clear, but they had this Mylar back on them—the face of the Mylar was on the back of the acrylic sheet—so that the reflection had a lot of depth when you looked into it. He really liked those. They had bronze ones, silver ones, gold ones, all kinds of different sheets like that. On this particular painting, right across the middle of it—I don't remember the name of the painting—he said he wanted a sequence of these Mylar sheets across there and I said, "Well, how big do you want them?" I assumed he wanted just a bunch of straight ones. Well, no. He didn't want that. He stood in front of the painting and I handed him my pencil and he said, "Well, we'll do it like this." He just made a series of marks across the painting like this, these big curving kind of marks, irregular kind of marks. Then he went back and labeled them. Actually, he may have drawn this before because I had to have him come there and put the marks on where he wanted them. I think he actually sketched this first. I remember seeing it on a piece of paper, the labels, the colors he wanted to use in different places. So then the challenge was to cut those into different sheets and have these irregular edges on them that matched perfectly with the one next to it. That was probably one of the more significant challenges as far as I was concerned.

This is one of those areas that I never knew exactly when I was doing things right and not doing them right. Being a carpenter, I want joints to come out right. I want them to be perfect. I want them to fit together perfectly and to be flush, I want everything to work out really pretty. A lot of times, art is not done that way. [Laughs] So while I might have spent a lot of time making something look really perfect, he might have been happy with it not so perfect. But he never criticized that at all. I don't recall him ever coming and saying, "That's not what I wanted." It may have happened and I may have buried it. I don't know. [Laughs] I don't remember him ever saying, "That's not what I wanted." There might have been some time, if he made me a sketch and I went to discuss what I was doing, he might have said, "No, no. That's not what I want. I want to do this." But I really don't remember ever completing something and then having him come and say, "This is really not what I had in mind." We worked well together in that way.

I didn't have any artistic desires in me at all. A lot of the people who worked here did. A lot of them were artists and just reveled in the fact that they got to work here, with him. That was never an issue for me because I didn't come here to work because of him. I didn't come seeking him and I didn't have a desire to be an artist or do my own work. So it was, I think, one of the reasons we worked really well together. It was a good relationship, a good working relationship.

I don't recall other things that were really—some of the structural things I mentioned. I seem to remember that there was one piece that did have an old piece of rough lumber or timber that he wanted poking right out of the middle of it with a tire or something hanging off the end of it.

Q: I flagged this section of this book because you can see, I think, the images of some of these pieces.

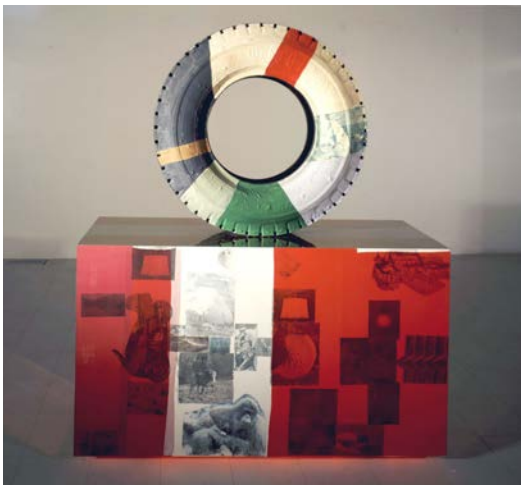
Pharr: Oh, that's *Rodeo Palace*.

Q: Yes. So if you flip through here, I think you'll see—I remember seeing an image of the one with the tire [note: *Hog Heaven (Scale)*].

Pharr: Yes, I remember a lot of these. [Laughs] Go ahead.

Q: Well, you can look.

Pharr: I think he used tires with some frequency. I know there was one that was sort of a long—I don't know what you call it. It was rectangular and three-dimensional. It was probably 4 feet tall and 2 feet wide and maybe 4 feet long or so, and there was a tire standing on top of it. It was on wheels and rolled around [*Phoenix* (*Scale*), 1978].



Robert Rauschenberg
Phoenix (Scale), 1978
Solvent transfer, fabric collage, and mirrored panels on wood support with collaged and painted tire, electric lights, and casters
77 1/2 x 64 1/8 x 20 1/4 inches (196.9 x 162.9 x 51.4 cm)
Jamileh Weber Gallery, Private collection

Some of the pieces like that had some challenge to them. He didn't want the wheels to show. He wanted it to move around almost as though it was levitating. I hesitate to—I don't remember in particular putting together this one with the chair. I remember doing some. This is the reflective material that you can see in this picture here. This happened to be red. This is probably one I did the structural work for. But it might not be. This might have been after I was here. The one with the oar that opens up and has the oar inside—and then this was part of a print project actually, that he did with [Sidney B.] Sid Felsen's studio [Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles; *Publicon* series, 1978] and it was the same idea as *Rodeo Palace*. As you change it, you can open the doors. It's closed up and it looks like one thing. You open the doors and it's something else. I don't remember how many pieces there were, maybe six or eight [six], that he did associated with that. All of them, you could change them. You could slide something out here and it changes the way the painting looks, or you open a pair of doors and it looks different. There was something on the back of the doors that you don't see from the front. All those sorts of things. All of them very intriguing to work on and very unusual. You're right. I don't see the one with the tire.

Robert Rauschenberg
Publicon–Station I, 1978
Painted wood cabinet with fabric collage, Plexiglas mirror, polished aluminum, with gold-leafed paddle and electric lights
59 x 30 x 12 inches (149.9 x 76.2 x 30.5 cm)
From an edition of 30 published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

Q: Yes.

Pharr: But, yes, this was *Rodeo Palace*. I forgot the pillow was in it.

Q: So that's the first one.

Pharr: This was the first one. Yes.

Q: So tell me. He would say to you okay, these are the panels that I need. So let's talk about this piece in particular. Did he come and see what you were doing or did your work sort of arrive in the studio and then he started working on the next step or—?

Pharr: I have an idea, but I can't say for sure. For instance on this piece [*Rodeo Palace (Spread)*]— It's got the three doors in it and I'm quite sure he showed me the doors and more than likely—in many, many cases, he did a sketch—especially if there were significant objects

he was going to incorporate into it. He might know that on this piece he wanted to have that image of that bucket up there. If he did a sketch, he might sketch that in there. He didn't necessarily sketch out every detail of every piece, not by any means. He didn't draw that well. But he knew he wanted these doors in it and he knew where he wanted them.

Probably to some extent, especially early on, we'd talk about the panel sizes. In this case, there were four panels here. These are 3-foot panels, so this is 12 feet long and it's 7 feet and 3 feet, so it's 10 feet tall. So it's 10 feet tall and 12 feet wide. The exact locations of the doors had to be associated, to some extent, with the layout of the panels. In other words—structurally it wouldn't particularly be a good plan to have a door that started in this panel and ended up in this panel. So you can see that this door is entirely included in this 3-foot by 7-foot panel. This is entirely in this panel and this one is entirely in this panel. So, to some extent, we probably talked about those kinds of details, in terms of exactly where the doors were going to lay out.

For instance, I'm guessing he had to know when he made this panel here, that this door—I probably cut this panel out for him before he did any image transfer or anything. Probably took the gessoed panel. I may have cut it out. I may have sized it before he even gessoed it, but, given that it had to fit around the door the way it does, more than likely that panel either had the door laid out on it so that he knew where the door was going to be, or it was actually cut out. Judging by the fact that these all ran through a press, I'm guessing that I probably marked where the door was going to be and he worked on the whole panel. He was just aware of where the door was going to happen and where it wasn't going to happen.

Q: Okay and that was something that he would have known, that he needed to put the whole door on one of the panels or that was something that he depended on someone like you to tell him?

Pharr: It was probably based on feedback from me.

Q: Okay.

Pharr: He was respectful of the fact that some consideration had to be given to the structural integrity of the piece. It didn't always stop him from wanting something that seemed impossible and if he had an idea, he would say, "Well, this is what I want to do." He wouldn't say, "Can I do it?" He would say, "This is what I want to do." If I saw significant problems with it or it seemed to me that it wasn't possible for me to do what he wanted to do, then I would talk to him about it. But first I would exhaust every method or every means within my limited abilities to come up with what he wanted. My goal was to facilitate, from a structural standpoint, him being able to produce the effect he wanted to produce in his art. So I didn't dictate where these doors went. I would just say well, from the standpoint of handling this and shipping it and structure and everything else, it would be good if this door was entirely within this panel and didn't protrude into this panel because it's going to make for difficulty in handling it. It's going to probably increase the possibilities for damage in the long run and so forth. He didn't turn a deaf ear to that kind of input, by any means.

Q: Okay. So then you have these four panels. And then you said they go through the press.

Pharr: Each one of these panels would have been gessoed, front and back, and then he would—like you see this color here is not paint. It's fabric. You see the polka dots in here? This is probably either a white or an off-white kind of fabric. This may not be entirely covered by fabric and you can tell there's some down here where the pillow is under it. This over here, obviously, was a fabric on the lower part. This section here may not have a fabric on it or it may be the piece of fabric in here and this may just be the white gesso. This is, obviously, fabric. It looks to me like most of these panels were covered pretty much entirely by fabric and then, if I remember correctly, even though I wasn't involved day in and day out in this process, all of these images were transferred onto the fabric surfaces using the press.

Q: After the fabric was attached to the panel.

Pharr: After the fabric was attached and dried, so they would—I have to say, I wasn't there. I spent some time in the print shop, but I wasn't there a whole lot during these processes. They may have spent one night just putting on fabric, it may have been two nights or it might have been a week. I don't know how long it took them to put this together. I don't recall at all. But the fabrics had to be put on, gessoed in place, and then they had to dry, so it wouldn't have been the same night usually, as a rule, that they would start doing image transfer. That would happen over the coming nights. All the images, if I remember right, didn't go on there at once. He may have put some of them on there, run it through the press, and stand back and look at it, put it against the wall. My memory of walking into the print shop is that sometimes there would be a whole bunch of these panels leaning against the wall and they would take one out of the middle and put it on the press and he might put some more things on there and run it through the press and

transfer some more images and then put it back on the wall. I think it was very much an organic process that developed, that kind of grew as he saw how the panels were looking. Like this cardboard box, glued on here, I don't know—that might have been well after everything else was done. He may have said that's what I need right there. I don't know.

But anyway, this was the initiation of the whole time I worked here, it started with this painting right here. It's the first thing I worked on, with no prior exposure to that kind of stuff at all. None whatsoever.

Q: Did you like working with—did you like the change of scenery? Going from a carpenter—I assume you were mostly working on your own—to working as part of a larger team?

Pharr: Yes. Once he really started producing these paintings. I can't remember exactly—for instance, once this painting was done, I don't know whether he called his gallery in New York and said, "I've got these. I want to do a whole new series of paintings and I want to have a show, and so I want to start right now and I'm going to produce ten paintings and I'm going to have them there." I don't know how all that worked. I know that we did have deadlines because, obviously, there was a show date when he had an opening at one of the galleries and he had to produce a certain amount of work for that date. Usually it involved some sleepless nights near the end, to get it done and then load it on the truck and then drive it up there. It got a little tense or intense. It could be tense, but it was mostly just intense. It was just working hard and people tended to pitch in wherever they could pitch in at the end to get everything ready.

But yes. It was a truly unique experience. If you set out to plan your life that way, you would never come across it. I set great store in it. I valued the experience, but it didn't mean the same thing to me that it would have meant to someone who was an aspiring artist. It didn't mean anything like the same thing to me. I valued the experience because I enjoyed tremendously working with Bob. I enjoyed tremendously being around most of the people who were here. Not all of them—I'll be candid that way—but I enjoyed the company of most of the people I worked with. It was rewarding. I don't recall anybody being particularly effusive in praise of what I did, but just the mere fact that I was doing it and I was making a contribution to what, by all accounts, was great art. [Laughs] To that extent, it was a rewarding experience.

My wife [Sheryl Long] was involved here as well. She worked a lot with the fabrics that he did. I ended up working, I think fairly quickly, full-time here. I was self-employed. I was doing all sorts of maintenance and one thing or another on these properties out here. They were all falling down—not his properties necessarily, but other properties on the island. But once I started, once we got involved with this, I was working here pretty much full-time. While he didn't dictate when I worked and when I didn't work, it kind of made sense for me to work, if not exactly the same hours, at least with enough overlap so that if I had questions and needed input I had access to him when he was awake enough and not busy with his art production. I'd have some time when I could have access, interact with him, and get questions answered and things of that sort. So I ended up working primarily afternoons and evenings, whereas he worked evenings and nights. Ultimately, at some point, getting these projects ready to go.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: You were talking about your schedules.

Pharr: Right. Most of my waking hours ended up being spent here, either because there were things going on or because I was working. A lot of people visited. There was, at some level, an expectation that the people who worked here were sociable. We enjoyed it. We met a lot of people, people we never would have met before. There was always a curiosity about people who were coming and you wanted to be here to meet and see these people. I remember the first time Sid Felsen ever came here. To me, it was almost like a movie star showed up. He got out of the cab. He was wearing all white and had on a hat and he just looked like California. He had such a reputation among, for instance, Peter, who worked with Bob. They always talked about Sid like he was a mythical figure because of his print shop and all that he had been involved in. So when you hear Sid Felsen's coming, you want to be there. You want to see him, you want to see what Sid has to say. [Laughs]

So there was a very social aspect of things as well that extended beyond the work, frequently having meals here. The most difficult thing in the course of most days, if it was more of a social situation, was leaving. Even when you wanted to leave, Bob didn't want you to leave. It was always difficult because you'd want to sneak out. You'd see people sneaking out the back door to avoid the scene that would happen because he just didn't want people to leave. He wanted you to stay and have a good time and enjoy it. That became sort of a contrivance. You had to contrive ways to get out of the house at times. [Laughs]

Q: You spoke about enjoying the people you were working with. I'm interested in hearing a little bit more about how your roles overlapped with other people that were working here at the time.

Pharr: The other people working here, just briefly: Peter Wirth was the printer. Bob Petersen ran the house. He had his own studio and he did his own work, but he was involved in sort of an overall oversight way. Not just in running the household, but if I needed something I would go ask him about it. I would go see if he knew where it was or if he knew if we could get it. In some ways he was like a quartermaster. If you need something, go see Bob Petersen. He would know. The people who came to the yard for whatever reason called him Mr. Lewis. Go see Mr. Lewis. He was a really wonderful guy. He was one of the most polite people I've ever known in my life and so considerate of people, very, very thoughtful and wouldn't hurt your feelings for anything in the world even if you asked him the stupidest thing you could possibly think of. So he was just a real pleasure to interact with.

If I remember right, and you may know more about this than I do at this point, but Bob Petersen and Peter Wirth were the other primary people who were there all the time, like I was. I think when I first started to work, Peter actually lived there and then he moved in with somebody who lived out on the island after a while so he wasn't living on-site. But there was a constant interchange. For instance, [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi] would come from New York and spend a while here. That was like having a little tornado in the middle of everything when Sachika was here, but he was so much fun. He changed everything when he came here. It changed the whole dynamic when Sachika would come, he was just so much fun. Occasionally, people came in from the East Coast and some of the staff from New York would come down

here and we always enjoyed each other's company, spent a lot of time together. The constant ebb and flow of people in and out, from people who were staff from other locations to people who were associated with the galleries or the museums who would come and stay for a while or visit for a while. All of that was always very intriguing and, in a way, very energizing.

I didn't get away from here that often, a couple times a year maybe, to install shows in Los Angeles or New York, primarily New York. But having the people coming here and interacting and all of that, gave you a much better idea of what the big picture was like, what the whole scene was like. Because these people, they're coming in and talking about all the stuff that is going on here and what's going on there and all of that was a very energizing scene to be involved in. I remember that [Robert] Bob Hughes—he wrote an article, I think, for *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* magazine and he referred to those of us who were around Bob in some sort of disparaging way. I can't remember exactly the word he used and maybe I misunderstood the word, but there were those people who just wanted to be there because they liked being involved, close to someone like him. But I think most of the people I knew who were working around Bob were artists in their own rights and most of them were making a contribution of some significant sort. Most of them were not there simply as suck-ups. I think that's what I thought the word he used meant. I don't know if I have that article still, but at any rate, I didn't get the impression that most of the people were that way. There were some people who would try to drop in at his house when he was up there in New York, probably more so than there were down here. I remember him avoiding some people who would want to come see him because he knew that's all they were there for. But most of the people who were down here were not here

for that reason. This was where the work happened so it was more work-oriented here, at least in my exposure to it.

Q: Did you and Peter ever have any conversations about facing specific—

Pharr: Yes.

Q: Yes?

Pharr: Yes. I don't remember any in particular, but I do remember we had discussions about—I think he was probably, as often as not, the one I got information from because he would be working with Bob at night and I might see him in the morning before I saw Bob or around lunchtime before I saw Bob. I might see him first and he might pass on information about something that had developed or that they were going to add. Bob decided he wanted to add two more panels on the end down here so we need to get some more stuff ready. Things of that sort, yes. It wasn't uncommon for that to happen. Again, I got along with Peter really well. We didn't have any conflicts that I recall. For the most part, there weren't conflicts for the first few years. Ultimately, there were.

Q: What happened? What changed?

Pharr: Things change. Personnel changes. Probably the single biggest change that happened, that started a chain of events, was Bob Petersen leaving. That was one of those things you'd have to

point to as a milestone, in a way. That meant someone had to take his place and also Peter Wirth leaving. I don't recall which of them left first. I'm thinking Peter Wirth left first. Yes, I'm pretty sure he did, just because of things that happened after that. Peter Wirth—I guess he fell in love with Sid Felsen's stepdaughter and moved to Los Angeles and he had to be replaced. They needed a printer and so Bob had Terry Van Brunt come down. I think he was recently back from Japan and was in New York or maybe he came back from Japan to come here. I don't recall exactly. That really changed the dynamics. It wasn't too long after he came here as a printer that Bob Petersen left. Terry sort of took over all of what Peter Wirth was doing as well as what Bob Petersen was doing and he wasn't as pleasant to work with as Bob Petersen was.

That really changed the dynamics for most of us who were working here at that time. My wife worked here, as I've said, and our friend, Marcia Stice. She and my wife worked together on a lot of things. She didn't work here as much—she was the woman Peter Wirth lived with for a while before he moved to California and she would help out on some projects, but it wasn't a consistent thing. But she was around a lot. She was very much a part of the dynamic. She was a very energetic, fun-loving person, but also very hard-working when the requirement was there to work hard. She added a lot to the whole scenario, the whole scene here. I don't recall her traveling as much, going to the shows and stuff. She may have more than I remember. I know she did some, but I don't remember a whole lot. It was a great time. All in all, it was a really great time, one I wouldn't trade for anything, even though it was thirty-five years ago now. [Laughs]

Q: So your wife—did she end up working here because you started working here or did you meet here?

Pharr: No, we didn't meet here. We were married not long before we moved down here. I'm guessing—I'm almost certain—I'm positive that she wasn't here prior to me. He was doing a series that involved a lot of fabrics.

Q: The *Hoarfrosts* [1974–76]?

Robert Rauschenberg
Pod (Hoarfrost), 1975
Solvent transfer and collage on fabric
51 1/4 x 35 1/2 inches (130.2 x 90.2 cm)
Private collection, New York

Pharr: *Hoarfrost*. I tend to think that those overlapped some with the *Spreads* and *Scales* because I'm fairly certain she worked on those. I think he still did quite a bit of that stuff after this started. I don't remember the sequence there really well, but I'm thinking—what do we have here—'75,'76? I suppose it's possible that she was working here before I got involved with this and that may be how I got involved—that may be how I was putting his windows in his house because

she had been working here some for him. I know she worked a lot sewing when he was doing these fabrics so she might have been working here prior to that. You have to ask her. She'd probably remember a lot better than I do. Because we moved here in 1973, yes, in the spring of 1973 and I was involved with trying to buy that business for the first year, which would have made it the spring of '74 and this is '75, '76, so I suppose it's possible that she was working on some of his stuff before I got involved. Maybe it's probable because I know she did quite a bit of work on the *Hoarfrost* pieces.

Q: Yes. And those would have been before.

Pharr: Yes. I think he still had some going on a little bit that overlapped with this, but not very much. So yes. She must have been here before I started doing this sort of stuff here. She's also very talented in an artistic way, but also in a very practical way as far as putting things together and making things work the way they're supposed to work with fabric and all that. She's very skilled and very talented that way. So she made a tremendous contribution and even on the *Spreads* and *Scales*, there was some sewing and some fabric involved, and she was involved on some of these as well. I don't remember which ones in particular.

Q: So interesting how many different roles there are in creating a piece of that size.

Pharr: It is interesting. I guess what's as interesting as anything to me and it probably is true of almost any situation you look at, is the uniqueness of the individuals who are involved in it, and how they all happen to be there at that time, doing what they do or doing what needs to be done

to accomplish that end result. There's not a plan to that. Rauschenberg didn't advertise for a carpenter to build the frames he needed—he probably would have gotten someone far different from me and maybe someone better than me or far less satisfactory than me. Ultimately, it just happened that I was here. It happened that my wife and I moved here just prior to all this starting. Is it all chance? I don't know.

Q: Well, what do you think?

Pharr: I don't know. I don't have any idea if it's chance or not. Ultimately, in terms of the things I've done in my life, was it necessary that I do this to be where I am today? I don't think so. I've said I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's such an absolutely unique experience to do that sort of thing and for someone like me to do it, with no art background and prior to this no real interest in modern art. Even after working on his projects for as many years as I did, which was four or five years, four years probably, I have really no more ability to look at a piece of modern art and say that's good art or bad art than I had before I started. [Laughs]

Q: But has it changed the way you look at art?

Pharr: Yes, definitely.

Q: How?

Pharr: I had a conversation with my granddaughter. We were looking at some photographs that a fairly well-known photographer takes here in Florida. They're photographs of Florida landscapes and he waits until he gets the perfect shot that he wants and it has the right composition that he's looking for. He's got it set up where there's a balance and everything is composed the way he wants to see it. I was looking at it with my granddaughter and I said, "Can you look at one of these photographs and see how you can look differently at what is an abstract painting and see how that would relate to this photograph?" He's got the dark clouds over here and the rainstorm. He's got this shade of whatever color it is in the center here where the water is and then he's got the foam where the waves are breaking over here. I said, "All of those things, you can combine in a painting. It's not exactly that photograph, but it's the combination of the colors and the shapes and the way things interact together." Had I not had this kind of exposure, I don't know that I could have given that—if you talk to some artists here, they'll listen to what I say and it'll sound like child's play to them. But for her, it made a lot of sense. It gave her an insight that she wouldn't have had and didn't have and she was going, "Oh. Oh yes." I'm like a child with this stuff.

I remember when Cy Twombly came here one time. We loved Cy Twombly. He was just this great guy. He had such an incredible ability to make an understatement. He was just phenomenal. His swimming was a good example, the best example of his understatement. His swimming was to wade out in the water about waist deep and then pitch water up on himself. That was going swimming. [Laughs] He was that way about everything. He just had a way to condense an event or a happening or something into a sentence that just absolutely nailed it, in such few words. He was just tremendous. But his work—you look at the things he has done and it's like a little

scribble here and a little scribble here and a little blotch of something here and it's the kind of stuff that everybody looks at and goes well, my kid could do that. [Laughs] Even the titles of his paintings—they had such incredible literary references, many times. His paintings from [Leonardo] da Vinci's—what was the work that da Vinci did which had to do with the underworld? Now I can't remember it. It may come back to me later. But anyway, it certainly gave me a different way of looking at that sort of stuff and seeing some value and some meaning in it, other than scribbles on paper.

Q: Sure.

Pharr: I can't reproduce it. I don't have that ability myself, but certainly I see the value in it, whereas I may not have ever seen that had I not had this kind of exposure to it. Watching Bob Petersen paint—he was famous for taking a straightedge and drawing a line down the edge of a canvas and looking at it and saying, "I'll have to get back to that tomorrow." [Laughs] Or those sorts of things. It's such an expression of people and it's such an expression of their creativity and it's so individual that I think it's easy for most of us to really overlook the value of that kind of work.

Q: So you spoke a little bit about traveling to install different—so tell me about that.

Pharr: Well, probably where we traveled most often was New York. He showed in both the Castelli gallery and the Sonnabend Gallery while I was working here and that's where most of his work was shown. I remember we took at least one truckload, maybe two, to Doug Chrismas's

gallery in Los Angeles. [Laughs] I think he had a love-hate relationship with Doug Chrismas. I guess this is one of those times when I probably should censor what I say before I say it. In some ways, I don't think he trusted him. Actually, I should say I know he didn't trust him because I took a truckload of art out there and got to Los Angeles, called Bob to let him know I was there, and he said, "Do not unload anything until I tell you it's okay to or until Doug gives you a check," or whatever it was. Now that never happened in New York, never once, but he told me, do not unlock the truck. Don't unload anything until I give you the okay. And ultimately, Doug—is that his name? Doug Chrismas?

Q: Yes.

Pharr: He had to pay Bob for previous works that he had sent out there. He was notorious for selling work and then not paying when he was supposed to pay—I shouldn't say he was notorious for it, but at least, as far as I knew in our little clique down here, he was. So Bob told me not to unload the truck, not to take anything off the truck until he gave me the okay. Ultimately, on that trip, I don't remember how much money he required Doug Chrismas to give me before that work came off the truck, but it was a lot. Fifty thousand dollars or something like that? I expected him to give me a check. Doug Chrismas was so angry, he went to the bank and he got ones. [Laughs] I had to take the money to the bank and have it counted before I would unlock the truck out there in Los Angeles.

So delivering paintings to the galleries was always an adventure. In New York it was an adventure because you never knew what was going to happen to the truck. You never knew if you were going to be able to park anywhere close to the gallery.

Q: Yes, how did you handle that?

Pharr: Well, the first time I took a truck up there, I got in at night and parked it on the street near Bob's house, near Lafayette Street. I had something on the truck that had to go uptown. The next morning, I went out and the person—I don't know what exactly you'd call his role—[Charles] Charlie Yoder in New York—he and Sachika managed—I guess Sachika primarily managed the house. Charlie Yoder was sort of a business manager or a liaison with the galleries. I'm not sure exactly what his role was. He and Larry—you may have to help me with names.

Q: There are several Larrys. There is Larry—well there's Lawrence Voytek, who was down here. Larry [B.] Wright?

Pharr: Larry Wright.

Q: Okay.

Pharr: He and Larry Wright were buddies, but I seem to remember that the very first time I ever went to New York, when I went out the next morning, either one or both of them rode with me uptown. I'd barely been out of the state of Florida, much less to New York City, and just

moments before we got to our truck, someone walked by and smashed the mirror on the side of the truck. This woman was there and she said, "That guy—he just went around the corner—did it," and we went running up there and he was two or three blocks away, running. She said that for no particular reason, he just walked by and took his hand and slapped it as hard as he could and broke it.

I remember driving uptown with them and I was on Bowery and it seemed to be about the width of five lanes, maybe three. I don't remember. There were no lines that you could see anywhere and I was trying to negotiate through the traffic and I'm looking over there trying to see in my mirror, and Larry or Charlie—whoever was with me—said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm trying to see if I can get over. I need to move over that way," and he said, "Just go. You're in a truck. You don't need to look. Just go." [Laughs] So all of that was a really unique experience for me. I think most of the time after that the truck was left at the gallery. I don't know for sure. I can't remember exactly whether they had someplace where we could park it there. I can't even believe the first time I drove a truck up there that we left it on the street at night. I didn't think much about it at the time, but in retrospect, I can't imagine that we did that, but we did.

It was great, like I said, to go to the galleries. Everything is focused on getting his show up and getting it looking good and getting everything right and there are all kinds of people dropping in. All kinds of people coming in all the time. Usually, as a rule, I worked with the gallery staff. I took tools with me, but frequently needed things that they had and they always had someone who was working with me and getting things hung up in the right place. They could also tell me where I could actually put a fastener in the wall and where there wasn't anything to hook to.

They had that kind of insight. It was always fun, always a lot of fun. It was kind of like putting on a show. You work real hard, you're there, and then you go home and change clothes and come back. It's like it's a whole different thing when you come back. You walk in, oh boy, this looks great! But you didn't see that while you're putting it all together. So it was a fun time.

Q: How long would it normally take to hang a show?

Pharr: My memory is, at most, maybe a little over a day. A lot of times, just a day. There weren't, as a rule, that many pieces. They were big pieces. Maybe—I don't know if I'm remembering it right—eight or ten? Maybe more, but for the most part a lot of them were big pieces, getting them assembled and put together, and there was always plenty of help. There were always people around who wanted to give a hand. In some cases, it's harder to keep the volunteers under control than it is to actually do it with a helper and make sure everything gets done right. It didn't take that long, as a rule, to put a show together.

Q: Were you there when Bob would come and do a walkthrough and check it out?

Pharr: As a rule, but my memory is that wasn't usually a really formal thing. I do remember one time—and it didn't have anything to do with any of the stuff that we were working on—it was when the Smithsonian [National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington D.C.], I think, did a retrospective and it was traveling to different places [*Robert Rauschenberg*, 1976–77]. I remember being in Washington when they had it there and that's the time—for whatever reason—I remember him coming and looking at the way they had installed it. I don't remember a

whole lot about him doing it in the galleries. I'm sure he did it, but probably in a more casual kind of way. Walking through with Ileana [Sonnabend] or Leo and their right-hand people. Just looking at it. But it was more a social occasion than it was a real formal, "No, that's got to move over there, up a little bit here, down a little—" He didn't really get into that very much. That I remember. It wasn't his role.

Knowing him, once he completed this body of work, I'm sure that he was always anxious about how it was going to be received. I don't think that he could possibly have avoided that. I don't think he had that kind of arrogance, that, "I don't care what people think. This is my work. They can like it or not. Who cares?" I think he cared a lot about how his work was received. I never really talked to him about that. The only conversation I ever had with him that gave me any insight into that sort of thing was when I told him I was leaving. We had a conversation then that gave me as much insight into him as anything I'd ever experienced prior to that. Especially after that conversation, I feel certain that he always had a certain amount of anxiety—I may be wrong. He never told me that he did, but from what I know of him and what little bit of insight I really had into him, I feel fairly certain that everything he did had great import, as far as he was concerned. If you think about people who are in the position that he was in, he didn't get there by not taking chances and he didn't get there by happenstance. He got there by working hard and, I think, by putting himself in situations where he could fail and fail big time. I think that every time he produced a body of work like that, he was in that position. This might be the ones that nobody likes or these might be the ones that they go, "What in the world was he thinking?" I'm sure he had a certain amount of anxiety. He drank a lot and especially on those opening nights at the galleries, he drank a lot. I think a lot of that had to do with that anxiety. I don't know. I

suppose he was an alcoholic. Maybe he would drink a lot anyway. I don't know. But I don't think that he took any of his work lightly. I don't think he was frivolous about any of it. He had fun doing it, but he wasn't frivolous. Very serious.

Q: What did you learn about him in the conversation that you had when you said you were going to go?

Pharr: This may be one of the things that I strike out.

Q: Well, think about it. Think about what version you might tell that you won't want to strike out.

Pharr: Well, one of the reasons I— He and I, we had a good relationship. We didn't infringe on each other's personalities in some ways. We didn't infringe on each other's independence. He didn't dictate to me and, even though I wasn't in a position to dictate to him, I didn't. We just had a good working relationship, one that I appreciated a lot and enjoyed a lot. Because of some of the changes that happened here and because I felt that it was time in my life for me to be moving on, that I didn't think I could be Rauschenberg's carpenter for the rest of my life, I decided that it was time. It was very difficult. I'm not good at giving people news they don't want to hear. It took me ten minutes to send you a text saying I was going to be late. I don't like to tell people things they don't want to hear. But I had to tell him and so one evening before he went to work and after he'd been up a while, I told him I wanted to talk to him about something. We went out for a walk on the beach and I told him and he was upset. It's interesting, he told me

some things—I always presumed that he was this strong, overwhelming personality, that he was very sure of himself and that he was never unsure of himself, that he was very comfortable in the position he was in. He said to me, "The whole time you've worked here, I've always admired you so much because you're so sure of everything you do." I don't see myself that way at all. Not even remotely that way. Unfortunately, I can't quote him verbatim, exactly what he said, but in short, he said that he always feels so insecure and that he admired me because I always appeared to be so secure in what I was doing, in dealing with situations. I just told him, I said, "Well, that's not true at all. As a matter of fact, I think it's exactly the opposite. I always feel that you're the one who's on top of your game and knows exactly what you're doing and is so sure of yourself." That was probably the most intimate conversation we ever had and the most revealing for each other.

It gave me an insight into him and especially as the years have gone by and as I've lived my life and dealt with situations and come to have a little better insight into why people do what they do and how they get where they get—it brought me to the realization that it wasn't easy for him, even at the pinnacle of his success, which I think may have come after I was here. I don't know when he would have reached his pinnacle. He was obviously very, very well-known and very successful at what he was doing when I worked here. But even at that time, he still, I think, had a level of insecurity about what he was doing and a level of uncertainty about his success. He needed to be reassured, like everyone else needs to be reassured. So that was what gave me a little more insight into him.

Q: Yes.

Pharr: Having that conversation.

Q: I wanted to ask you about—you sort of characterized this as the place where the work happened and you would go up to New York sometimes to deliver, to install, and then to attend these receptions where the work was being seen by another audience for the first time. I'm just wondering if you can talk about that from your perspective as being someone who was from the place where the work was done and then taking it to this larger city in this art center?

Pharr: It was a phenomenal experience, to do that. In part because at some level and I'm always sort of self-disparaging about this because nothing that was ever done on this artwork was about me. It's Rauschenberg's work. But by the same token—and one of the projects we did while I was here was a set for one of—

Q: Merce Cunningham?

Pharr: —Merce Cunningham's dance productions on Broadway [*Travelogue*, 1977]. The Minskoff [Theatre], I think, was where it was. Is that on Broadway? Minskoff?

Costumes and set, entitled *Tantric Geography* (1977), designed by Rauschenberg for Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Travelogue* (1977). Collection on Robert Rauschenberg Research. Photo: Charles Atlas

Q: I believe you're right about the theater.

Pharr: Okay.

Q: Yes.

Pharr: We went to the opening night there and seeing the things that I made as part of a production on Broadway was pretty rewarding. I've since told many people. I've had work on Broadway. My work has been on Broadway, in sort of a joking kind of way. But that association, being in those places, being in New York, being in Los Angeles, being in Vancouver, being wherever this was happening, where Rauschenberg and his work are the center of attention and knowing that you had a part in producing it, obviously is very rewarding. Would it have gotten done without me? Yes. For sure. Would it have gotten done without Rauschenberg? No. So it wasn't at all about me. It was all about the work and his vision, which he produced in his work. That didn't stop it from being a rewarding experience for me, to know that I got to be part of it, that I had a hand in it, that I was able to interact and communicate with him, that I was able to help him accomplish what he wanted to accomplish. Helping create something that would have

the visual impact that he wanted it to have, or create some sort of a feeling that he wanted to create, and to the extent that I was able to help him do that—I don't know. I have no interest in any claim to fame because of the work that I did on the pieces he produced while I was there, but nonetheless it was rewarding work for me.

Q: And what were your observations about the scene in New York and how other people responded to him and to the work?

Pharr: I don't know. He was such a figure. To me, with the status that he had, he could have taped shells to a canvas and called it art and people would go, "Whoa, that's great. That's incredible." Just like I was saying about him, revealing that he wasn't one hundred percent secure in what he was doing, I would never have thought that, by virtue of the fact of who I'd come to know as Rauschenberg, what I'd come to know about him, that his work was beyond reproof. He couldn't produce something bad because he was Rauschenberg. That's the way people were. When I went to the openings, I didn't hear anybody going, "Well, that's an ugly piece of junk. What in the world was he thinking when he did that?" They didn't say that. Everybody was just, "Oh, it's awesome, it's just incredible." And it was. It was like in Hollywood when they have the—

Q: Premiere.

Pharr: —premiere nights for movies. That's sort of the way these openings were. He was the star of the show and people couldn't get close enough to him. People couldn't spend enough time

with him. You'd see people dragging somebody over to meet him because he was the man. He was the one. When I went to the openings, I was ready to leave after not very long. I didn't know most of the people there and I didn't want to get falling down drunk or anything like that. I got bored kind of quickly at the openings because you can only spend so much time walking around looking and maybe occasionally talking to someone. I shouldn't say bored, but I ended up staying usually, since I was part of Bob's entourage. I didn't up and leave. I'd stay there and we'd end up going out to eat or something after the openings. But they were phenomenal, they were fun for a while. I won't say they got tedious, but just that after a while it's more about whom you talk to, if you're a part of that scene. You could tell the people who were familiar with each other. It wasn't just Bob, people were saying, "Come over here, I want you to meet so and so, he's a collector." There was all of that maneuvering and talking to the right people and all that sort of stuff that went on at these shows, because there were connections made. There were deals to be made. Even though a lot of it, I think, was really subtle. I think that these gallery owners—when they see a painting, they've got somebody in mind they think they want to sell it to and they want to make sure they get in front of it that night. Those kinds of things were going on at the openings, which didn't have a thing to do with me. But it was fun nonetheless.

Q: Who was part of the crew in those days? You said you were part of the entourage, so who else was part of?

Pharr: Oh, who else was part of that entourage?

Q: Yes.

Pharr: When we were in New York, we frequently went to this restaurant where we ate raw beef. I don't remember the name.

Q: Like a Japanese place?

Pharr: Yes, a Japanese place. What do you call that?

Q: Sashimi is when it's the fish.

Pharr: No, that's the fish. It was like raw hamburger. It was spiced and it was good. What's it called? I can't remember now. The name escapes me. I'm just trying to remember who would have been there at those kinds of things. Well, in New York, Leo Castelli and/or Ileana would have been there for a while. They wouldn't necessarily have stayed very long. And their few top gallery people, two or three from each gallery. [Debra] Debbie—

Q: Taylor?

Pharr: —Taylor was frequently there and her husband—

Q: Al [Taylor].

Pharr: —Al would frequently be part of that. There would have been Sachika and whatever girl he might have been with at the time. Or actually his—did he ever marry her?

Q: He did. Agathe [Gonnet].

Pharr: Agathe, yes. She was frequently part of it. There were a couple of other guys. I remember Dennis Hopper coming one night, but he only came to the house. He wasn't really part of any entourage. There were a couple other guys I didn't know very well and actually, quite frankly, two or three of them I didn't want to get to know very well, who were, I'm assuming, connected through other people who worked there. There was a guy named Lincoln, a black guy with dreadlocks who worked there. I don't know if he worked there very much, but—I think Bob liked him and he was a friend of Charlie's, so he was there with some frequency. Charlie Yoder and Larry Wright for a while. I don't remember exactly when Larry got involved with things. Actually, I think Larry was down here for a period of time. It might have been after Peter Wirth left and before he hired Terry to come work as a printer. Larry might have been in an interim position down here working for him. Who else would there have been? Well, there was myself. There was my wife. There was Peter Wirth and Marcia Stice, who he lived with. I don't know. You'd have to ask somebody with a better memory than me.

Q: Is there a way that you would characterize the community that formed around him?

Pharr: I don't know that I could think of a word. As I've alluded to before, a lot of people from a lot of different backgrounds who happened to be in a place at a time by no design of any one of

them. It may have been a design by virtue of some—I don't know—unspecified cosmic intent. [Laughs] That sort of thing is left to more intellectual people than me. I guess there was a compatibility, which I think had to do with the fact that all of us knew that we were there by our own rights or by virtue of our own—I want to say importance, but importance is such a relative term. We were all there because of Bob Rauschenberg. We weren't there because we were all art students. We weren't there because we were all art dealers or art collectors or anything of that sort. We were all there because of Rauschenberg. We weren't there because we were all carpenters or whatever. The reason we were all there was because of Rauschenberg and because of where we fit in to that whole conglomeration of people and things and events that made that time.

Obviously, we were all special in our own way, but there was nothing about any of us that made one of us more important than the other in that circumstance and I think we all recognized that. There may have been the occasional person who had some delusions of grandeur or illusion about how important they were versus someone else, but for the most part I didn't hear anything about it. Didn't see anything about it. Didn't see people role-playing in any way that indicated that. I think that was almost because of our recognition that none of us would have any importance in that situation if Rauschenberg weren't at the center of it. If you took him away from it—well, I don't want to go there. I'm going to say if you took him away from it, then what would be left? Now, I look at this situation here now, where he is not, but he has left a legacy and his legacy is at the center. You're here because of that legacy. So it's still at the core of it. It's still at the core of a lot of things that are happening in a lot of people's lives, people who

come together and go apart and some of it stays and some of it goes. All of that is still centered, in many ways, around him and his work. I don't think it was a whole lot different then.

Q: Okay. I think I just have one or two remaining questions. You had earlier described—you were talking about Cy Twombly and you said that he was a great—he was a master of the understatement and that, in some ways, his art reflected that. And then you spoke about Bob Petersen and watching him draw this line. So I'm wondering if you can speak about Bob Rauschenberg in a similar way. When you looked at his work, was it a reflection of his personality and if so, how?

Pharr: I think in some ways, yes. In some ways, for me, looking at Bob's work is a lot more difficult than looking at other people's work. In some ways, it may be why I worked so successfully with him. I didn't attempt very much to analyze what he did, in terms of whether it was good or whether it was bad or whether it made a statement, whether it didn't make a statement, how it made me feel and all that sort of stuff. Since my role was what it was, I was far more concerned with making it come together to be satisfactory to him, what he wanted it to be. So I didn't very often look at it from a really critical standpoint—or I shouldn't say critical—from an analytical standpoint, trying to analyze it. In part it was because I didn't have the language for it, but it was also because my role didn't include that.

There were enough people around who were self-proclaimed art critics that I didn't need to be one. I came to enjoy it and appreciate it and not look at it from any kind of—well, I don't know if I want to say that or not. In some ways, the association I had with him and the exposure I had

to the art world gave me an insight that I would rather have not had. I don't want to say it's because of Bob or because of anybody else in particular, but this may be another one of those things I want to strike. Not that anybody really cares what I have to say about this, but in some ways, what made an artist successful was not his art but who took an interest in his art. You could have been the best artist in New York City and if you couldn't get Leo Castelli to recommend your art or to even come look at your art, it would be pointless, if you're looking for that kind of success, to continue doing it. I think there are a lot of people who are collectors who—gosh—I don't know why I started down this path. I think there are a lot of people who are collectors who want to be told what to collect and who don't have any idea what to collect if somebody doesn't tell them what to collect. This is a very cynical viewpoint and I'm sure it's not true across the board. There are people who appreciate art very, very much and who collect art because it speaks to them in a way that is important. But then there are a lot of people who don't. So I think—I don't know—gosh. You didn't ask this question so I don't even know why I'm going here.

But getting back to his work and having insight into his work. I did. I came to enjoy it a lot. Initially, the first time I saw it, I go, "What in the world? Why would anybody want this?" But especially as I watched him work on it and realized how serious he was about what he was doing, how unfrivolous he was about what he was doing, and how hard he worked at it. He was a dedicated workman, a disciplined workman, and worked very hard at his craft because it didn't necessarily come easily to him. This property where we're sitting right now, he traded eight pieces of art that he made particularly for that purpose. [Note: *Van Vleck* series (1978), named for Rauschenberg's Captiva neighbor, Joseph Van Vleck] I may be remembering this a little bit

wrong, but I think he paid a certain amount of money plus a certain number of pieces of art, which I think he made in three days or four days or a week. They weren't big pieces. It seemed to me they were about 4 feet square or so, maybe 3 feet square. I can't remember exactly how big they were. Some of those kinds of things, he turned out really quickly, but for the most part he worked really hard on his paintings to make sure that they were what he wanted them to be.

So from the standpoint of appreciating his work because of the effort he put into it, because of how seriously he took it, because of how important it was to him, then I learned at least that kind of appreciation for what he was doing, while I couldn't give you an analysis of one of his paintings or explain it to anyone in any circumstance. I might be able to look at a certain part of it and relate somehow to that, but to try to explain anything he did to anybody? That is far beyond my means and abilities, but I certainly appreciate his work for how seriously he took it and how seriously he worked on it.

Q: And you saw it differently after you'd been working here for a few years?

Pharr: Oh yes. Yes. Yes, definitely. Yes, very much so. Obviously, coming to know the art world or at least some aspects of the art world, to the extent that I was exposed to it, I saw it differently because of that. I saw it differently because of getting to know him and his personality and you can see that in his work. He was a very big personality. He could be just the most fun person in the world. He could be a pain too, but he could be a lot of fun. He liked to have fun. He liked to laugh. He loved people. Loved to interact with people a lot. You can see that—if you know him, you can see that in his work. You can see that desire to interact with people on some level. Yes.

Q: All right. I think I have asked you everything that I wanted to.

Pharr: I've probably told you more than you wanted to hear.

Q: Nope. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that I haven't asked you?

Pharr: No, not really. Just talking about some of this has brought back memories that I hadn't thought of for a long, long time, which I've mentioned. No. I don't think so, other than that for me, that particular time, being here on this island, it was a tremendously different place back then than it is now. We moved here in June and the first summer that I spent here I was just—I won't say I was astounded, but I was so amazed by how little activity there was here. Back then it was almost entirely a winter residence island. Aside from the Rauschenberg community, there was a subculture of year-round residents here, who, like ourselves, worked in the trades, worked in waitressing and as cooks in restaurants and things like that. I'm assuming that that subculture, to some extent, still exists. But it was a pretty—gosh, what's the right word without saying too much? [Laughs] It was pretty much—I don't know—outside the boundaries. A lot of stuff went on here in that young adult subculture that our age group was part of.

Especially when I started working for Rauschenberg and was working with him most of the time, I wasn't involved as much with that culture. In some ways I think that some of the people who are of our age group and lived here year-round, they felt like we acted kind of snotty because we worked at Rauschenberg's and, "We can't go do that because we've got to go over to

Rauschenberg's. So-and-so's going to be there tonight and he wants us all to be there." I think some people felt like we acted kind of snotty about it. I didn't feel like we were acting snotty, this was just where we needed to be. So it was a different place. A very, very different place. What I was going to say was, the first summer that I was here, I think that on any given day I could have put a lawn chair in the middle of the street down here in front of the Island Store and taken a 30-minute nap and not have had to move because there was nobody here. Nobody. It was very different than it is now.

Q: Yes, it's changed.

Pharr: But thinking about that and thinking about him being here. I don't know exactly when he came here.

Q: '70. [Note: Rauschenberg bought his first property in Captiva in June 1968 and established permanent residence there in fall 1970.]

Pharr: Yes, I was going to say around the early seventies. Not long before we came here. I'm not sure how he ended up coming here. I don't know if he came here on a holiday once or came to visit somebody here or what the deal was. I don't know exactly how he ended up here. But for that kind of community that developed around him here, at that time, on this little island, is pretty remarkable. What's more remarkable is that I happened to be here and happened to be part of it as well. Because it was just a great time, a great place to be, here on this island. I lived in a little cottage down on the bay over here. Didn't have air conditioning or anything. We didn't even

have a key to the doors. We had a pair of French doors on the front and just left them open all the time. Right on the bay, a dock about 50 feet from the front door, and it was just a beautiful, beautiful place. We enjoyed living here tremendously and being part of that community at Rauschenberg's was just icing on the cake.

Q: Sounds pretty sweet.

Pharr: Well, I appreciate you having the patience to sit and listen.

Q: It's really fun. It's fun to listen.

[END OF INTERVIEW]