

Interview with **HERMINE FORD**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

April 11, 2011

New York, NY

Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates. RRFA 08.  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

INTERVIEWER: It is Monday, April 11, in New York City, and I'm speaking with Hermine Ford.

Why don't we start with what took you to Black Mountain?

HERMINE FORD: Well, my father was the painter, Jack Tworokov, and he was invited to teach for the month of July, at Black Mountain, in 1952. So the whole family went, he and my mother, and my sister and I. We got on a Greyhound bus. This was the first time I'd ever been in the South, and even just the bus trip was an amazing adventure. The whole experience was exotic from the minute -- well, probably not the "minute" we got on the bus. Probably the Jersey turnpike wasn't that exotic, but the minute we went through very rural country roads -- it was the first time we ever experienced Jim Crow. My sister and I had a very unpleasant experience on the bus, where the bus driver -- we were sitting in the back, and a black woman -- he was picking people up, and driving them off, just along the highway -- and a black woman got on, and there was no place for her to sit, in the back of the bus, so he stopped the bus, and he made us get up. We didn't understand what he was talking about. He was very embarrassed, and he was very impatient with us. Finally, we moved. We moved to empty seats in the front of the bus, so this woman could sit in the back. That was our introduction to our month in North Carolina.

But anyway. The learning curve began almost immediately: Water fountains for whites only, at the little gas stations and the bus stop. So that's how we arrived. That's how we traveled, in those days, to Black Mountain. That's why we were there. That's how we got there. But I actually, to the best of my memory -- I had met Bob before that, because -- I wouldn't swear to this, but for whatever it's worth -- this is my memory -- that he and Cy Twombly came to visit my father on East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, where we lived, and they had just come back from North Africa. You probably know a lot about that trip. That is my first memory of meeting them, and of meeting Bob. They were incredibly handsome, and charming, and they both had desert boots on -- in my memory -- and I thought they were the most beautiful shoes I'd ever seen in my life, like tan, soft tan suede. And I have this in my mind that these desert boots came from North Africa. I have no idea if that's true or not. [Laughs]

So I must have been twelve, maybe, and I don't know how they sought my father out, or maybe they already knew that he was coming to Black Mountain and they sought him out because of that. I don't know how -- I mean, lots of people came to our house.

INTERVIEWER: I think your father was very important to Bob in 1951, helping, suggesting that he be included in certain shows.

FORD: Was that before we went to Black Mountain? It was?

INTERVIEWER: Nineteen-fifty-one.

FORD: Okay. So I'm learning something from you. So they already did know each other, and that was not the first time that they met, although it was the first time that I did.

INTERVIEWER: Was he shy?

FORD: Bob? Are you kidding? [Laughs] He was the most gregarious person in the world. I don't have a hard time imagining him being shy in certain ways. That's not excluded by people who are also very gregarious.

INTERVIEWER: Jim Rosenquist said when he met Bob for the first time, he was quite shy. I'd never heard that before, so I just wanted to ask..... So that was the first time you met him.

FORD: That was the first time I met him.

INTERVIEWER: And the second time you met him --

FORD: Well, I must have met him the next -- I don't know. I can't be certain. But I think -- in my memory, that visit -- it was not long after that, that we went to Black Mountain. Then I saw a lot of him there. I don't mean that we had a big, exclusive, personal relationship -- although there was a bit of that. We liked each other a lot, and he was the kind of person that paid attention to whoever was around, whatever age you were or whatever. I was fascinated. I turned thirteen in that month, and I had grown up in this kind of hotbed of artistic -- and I think that summer that I turned thirteen at Black Mountain I started actually really listening to what people were doing and saying around me. So because I had this adolescent awakening that month that I was there -- it influenced the whole rest of my life. I mean, Merce Cunningham and John Cage were there, and I actually loved the work they were doing so much that I studied with Merce. All the years I was in high school, I studied with him. That's where I first saw him dance, in the dining hall at Black Mountain College.

And Bob, he did the "tire piece" for a Merce dance there. I think that's pretty famous and documented, right? Or am I mixed up?

INTERVIEWER: "Tire piece?" Or the theatre piece?

FORD: A lot of this is jumbled in my mind, Karen. These are memories that go back so many years. I remember him performing in the dining hall, and I think that part of the performance included making an image by rolling tires across. Do you think I dreamt this? I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: No, I don't think so.

FORD: There's some element of truth to this. It might not be completely -- and I don't know why I had that mixed in with Merce and John. But anyway, I went to a lot of -- I mean, I was very eager. I participated as much as I could with the activities that were going on there. You know, I was thirteen, and saw -- like Dorothea Rockburne was there, and she was eighteen. We were worlds away. She was already married, and she was already pregnant with her daughter, Christine. And Sue was pregnant -- those babies were born at the same time, but Sue was not at Black Mountain that summer.<sup>1</sup>

INTERVIEWER: She was not.

FORD: No. They had already -- I know she wasn't. I think Cy and Bob were there.

INTERVIEWER: And Merce and John.

FORD: And Merce and John.

INTERVIEWER: And Dorothea.

FORD: And Dorothea. And then there were all the poets -- Fielding Dawson, and George Vick, and Joel Oppenheimer, and --

INTERVIEWER: Charles Olson?

FORD: Charles Olson was running the college. He was a very fearsome kind of guy, actually. He was terrifying. And [Robert] Creeley was there, although I don't remember him being there. I think he was there briefly. But I know my father became friends with him there, but I don't remember him there.

INTERVIEWER: What did they use that dining hall for? It was beyond dining. Was it the gathering spot?

FORD: Well, yes. There was a big building down there. We lived kind of up the hill, in a little house. It was on a lake, and there was a big front porch with steps. You went in -- I don't remember exactly what it was, but there was a big big kitchen, and there was a fantastic black woman who was in charge of the kitchen. I can't remember her name -- which is amazing to me. I might think of it, because everybody adored her. She was marvelous. It was a huge, institutional-sized kitchen, but it was old. It was kind of primitive. If you were late for dinner, she'd keep your plate warm for you in the oven. There were warmers over the stove. Then there was what was called the dining room, but we never ate indoors. We ate on this porch overlooking the lake. I don't know what they did in the winter time. The winter was a whole other place by that time. I think there were very few people there. As far as I'm concerned,

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Rauschenberg was born July 16, 1951. Dorothea Rockburne's daughter was born in late October, 1952 (KT)

Black Mountain College was July, 1952 -- beginning and end of story [Laughs] -- which, of course, is not the case.

INTERVIEWER: But it does seem like there was an electricity to those summer programs.

FORD: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: What I don't know -- if it was just a month, or if it was a month or two....

FORD: It was two. I mean, other people can fill a lot of this in for you. As I said, I was a child, still, really. But I know that -- for instance -- my father was there in July, and then Franz Kline was there in August. So there was kind of a changing of the guard. And there were probably other people rotated in and out, as well. So that would be a whole other flavor.

The other person who was teaching there that summer was Stefan Wolpe, and that's a very important friendship for my father, actually. They became friends there. That friendship lasted until Stefan died.

Anyway, it was very rich. Then, you know who was there and came to visit, and gave a performance, which was amazing, was the dancer Katy Litz.

INTERVIEWER: Litz sounds right to me, but I don't know why I say that.

FORD: Yes. But she was amazing. Merce was there for an extended period of time, because they were working there. They were making dances. Carolyn Brown was there then, and Viola. Of course. Viola. Yes. And Remy Charlip, I think, too, was there that summer. Sure. Because that was when I first met all of them.

Anyway, Katy Litz came, briefly, and gave a performance. So people came for much shorter periods of time. They came in and out, just kind of visiting. It was slightly changing. People showed up and left.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting, because I assumed that people would just "park" for the entire summer. It makes a lot more sense to think that Jack Tworkov is teaching in July, and now Franz Kline is coming to teach in August. Somewhere in there, there were -- well, there's the "rolling the tire," perhaps, as a theatre piece. I know there was a big production that John Cage called "Theatre Piece #1," which consisted of John reading poetry on a ladder, and Bob's white paintings on the ceiling, and other things like that. But it doesn't sound like that happened in July. It may have.

FORD: It may have. Absolutely. I didn't have a program to attend every single one of these things. But I went to a lot of them. And I just remembered, as you were talking, too -- I forgot what I was going to say. It'll come back to me. It had something to do with the work that Merce was doing there.

Oh. It's very, very possible that I first saw them dance to Erik Satie's music there. I know I did -- Because I was so in love with them, watching Merce dance that their first season

at, I think it was, the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York -- my father took me to see it. We went several times -- and they danced to a lot of Satie music.

INTERVIEWER: That's right.

FORD: Yes. So I'm not sure if that was the first time I saw them dance the Satie music.

INTERVIEWER: I believe he did do a place at Black Mountain -- the Satie.

FORD: Yes. So I may have -- You know, we named our son, Erik, for Erik Satie, which came to me through John and Merce.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's nice. That's nice.

A day for you was....So were you able to go and watch what people were working on?  
[Doorbell rings.. Interruption]

FORD: There's one other memorable thing -- memory of Bob -- and it has to do with my little solargram that I have out there. Because one of the most vivid memories I have of him -- and I'm sure you know a little bit about this -- he was very, very good friends with a woman who probably had polio. Hazel. She was very badly crippled. They were making solargrams together, outside in the grass, in front of the house that she lived in. I remember watching them do that.

INTERVIEWER: You call them solargrams.

FORD: I call them solargrams. What does the Rauschenberg Foundation call them?

INTERVIEWER: I don't know that there is a particular -- I call them blueprint pictures.

FORD: Oh. It *is* blueprint paper, developed by the sun. I call them solargrams, but I don't know where I got that from. Did I make that up? Or did other people refer to them that way?

INTERVIEWER: I've never heard anybody speak of them. But now they have a name. How did you receive this wonderful gift from Bob?

FORD: Well, I was kind of a pet there. For many, many years, afterwards, I thought that was kind of the highlight of my life, and then everything went downhill. [Laughs] I didn't really think that. But it was so vivid, the whole experience, for me. I turned thirteen that July -- in fact, July 13<sup>th</sup> is my birthday, and I turned thirteen. I don't remember that there was a party, actually, although there may have been, because my parents may have organized something.

Anyway, everyone was aware that it was my birthday, and I had quite a lot of presents that I received on that day, that I saved for many years. And of course, that one I treasured, that one from Bob. He gave me that for my birthday. I don't remember him actually handing it to me. Or, maybe I do. I think it was rolled up. Well, as soon as we got back to New York, my father had it framed for me. I always have had it; I've lived with it ever since.

INTERVIEWER: Did you bond....? You had met him before. But then there must have been a point where --

FORD: I don't remember sitting around and talking with him. I remember watching his work in the dining room. It was performance work. I remember watching that. I was very interested in his relationship with Hazel. He was so special with her. She probably was an amazing person. I didn't know her very well.

INTERVIEWER: She was a photographer.

FORD: She was a photographer, and she was very, very badly crippled. As far as Bob was concerned, she was just totally the greatest thing in the world, and they were having a ball doing this. That's what I remember. I remember they were having so much fun.

INTERVIEWER: Hanging out, or making pictures?

FORD: Making these things, making these solargrams together. I don't know if she was making hers and he was making his. I don't think it mattered. I think they were so delighted with this process they were doing.

INTERVIEWER: Did they show any pictures from the students' -- ? I was wondering what Bob was working on then.

FORD: See, my father would know. I don't think Bob -- I'm not sure he was actually, really, even still a student at Black Mountain. I think that he had gone back there. He lived further up the mountain, and he would come down. I'm not sure he was taking classes. I'm not sure he was in a class with my father.

INTERVIEWER: That's very helpful.

FORD: I think he was kind of hanging out. He liked it there. He had a place to work there. I think he came to New York permanently, very, very soon after that. And he already was in New York. You know that. He was already in New York. I don't really know what he was doing there, except just having fun there.

INTERVIEWER: That makes a lot of sense, particularly if you observe that he was there because he wanted to be there, rather than being a student. Because by that time, he had had one of his solargrams -- no, maybe it wasn't a solargram, but there was a *Life Magazine* article about him.

FORD: When did that come out?

INTERVIEWER: In '51, in June, I think. They had a Stable Gallery Exhibit, the Ninth Street Show --

FORD: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: All of that had happened --

FORD: No, he was no longer a student. I have an impression, always -- I never thought of him as a student there.

INTERVIEWER: But he lived up the mountain. Not with everybody else.

FORD: Well, people lived all over the place. It was all very irregular. There was a dormitory there, but I don't know anybody -- somebody must have lived in the dormitory. [Laughs] I don't remember that part. There was a certain part of what was going on, of course, that I was not privy to. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: So you didn't go around with Bob on his chores.

FORD: No.

INTERVIEWER: He probably didn't have chores at that point.

FORD: No. But we did work on the farm, my sister -- you asked what our day was like. We were expected (and we kind of liked it, we kind of wanted it) to work on the farm. That was kind of exciting for two little city girls. We worked hard. Yes. We liked it. People would arrange for outings. Somebody took us for a hike up in the mountains, and we were hoping to see rattle snakes. We were disappointed we didn't see any rattle snakes. I don't know what my sister did. My sister was younger. I think I started to read poetry that summer. I always was a reader, a kid that read all the time. I read a lot. I don't know how I filled my days up, exactly. I think I used to sit around with the students, and they were very into the poet part. The poets were all kind of into motorcycles, and Marlon Brando, and *The Wild One*.

INTERVIEWER: And the artists -- they were into what?

FORD: Well, the painters were a little bit -- I'm trying to remember. There was a painter there -- they worked. Everybody was working seriously, but there was also a lot of hanging out; a lot of banter, and then people would roar in with their motorcycles. But we also used to go swimming somewhere. I can't remember -- we didn't swim in that lake. One thing about that lake is that there were loons in that lake, because I remember hearing them at night, calling. That was beautiful. That was the first time I ever heard a loon.

INTERVIEWER: That's better than a rattle snake. [Laughter]

FORD: So I don't really know exactly how we spent our days. We went to as many events as we wanted to, or my parents thought we would be interested in. I remember there was a very well-known Balinese dancer who came to perform. I don't remember the name. I was taken to see that. That was wonderful. Everybody was very interested in that. Then a very famous scientist came and gave a lecture about -- I don't know if he was a mathematician or -- anyway, it was very heady stuff.

INTERVIEWER: A huge, multi-disciplined area there.

FORD: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did your father like that?

FORD: Oh, he loved it. He loved that. Totally.

INTERVIEWER: When you left Black Mountain, when did you see Bob again?

FORD: Well, then it was kind of like a love fest, like a family thing. For a number of years after that, they were always our preferred guests for holiday meals. My mother would say to us -- because my mother and father entertained a lot. They were very poor, so this was very much on a modest scale, but my mother was -- both of them were very, very good cooks, and they liked to really have people for drinks. In those days, people used to do that. Or have people for dinner. It was very bizarre, because of course we were Jewish, but my father loved holidays. He couldn't pass one up. We celebrated absolutely everything. Everything. We had of course Thanksgiving; we had Christmas dinner, and I think it was mostly at Christmas my mother would say -- she would say to my sister and I, "Who shall we invite for Christmas dinner this year? Do you girls have any ideas?" And we would always say, "Bob and Jasper, and Stefan and Hilda." Because they amused us. They amused us more than any other of my parents' friends. I have the most wonderful memories of Bob showing up for Christmas dinner. One year he had a beautiful silk vest that his mother had made for him, and he had two, or three, or four ducks that his mother had sent. I'll never forget this. They still had buckshot in them. They were cooked. They were shot down there in Texas, and cooked by her, I guess, and sent -- I don't know how she did this. We ate them. It was just... laugh, tell stories. It was very jolly.

INTERVIEWER: Did he jump into the kitchen?

FORD: I don't remember. I know he was a wonderful cook, and I know my parents used to go down there, and have dinner down there. I didn't do that.

INTERVIEWER: With Bob and Jasper.

FORD: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was Jasper a cook, also?

FORD: Oh, yes. After that, years later -- because then I knew Jasper during a certain period in the '60s, because -- oh, in a number of different ways. Of course, my father and he had stayed friends, but my husband, when he was very young, first showed at Castelli. So we used to see him. Then my father and I were friends were friends with Henry, so with Henry we would sometime go up and visit Jasper, and he'd be cooking dinner for us. We used to go up to Stony Point, too, to parties up there.



The contrast between them was something else, too, because -- You asked if Bob was shy. Bob was extremely extroverted, and Jasper was extremely introverted. They were really an odd couple that way. They were very different from each other. But I loved Jasper, as well. I always loved him.

INTERVIEWER: But they seem, for a while -- a fairly long while -- to be sort of the perfect pair.

FORD: You know what? I was heartbroken when they broke up. I was just devastated. It was as if your grandparents were getting divorced. [Laughs] I was just devastated. I loved them as a couple.

INTERVIEWER: Was it one of those breakups -- I've never thought about this -- but was it one of those -- today it would be all over the headlines?

FORD: You know, the funniest thing is -- My relationship to all of this was really strange, because on the one hand everything I'm just telling you I knew and experienced for myself. But then, as I said before, there were certain things I didn't hear grownups talking about a lot. And I don't really know too much about the breakup. I think I must have heard rumors. Then there was, Steve Paxton, I think, appeared quite soon after that.

I don't know. But I don't remember hearing a lot about it, for whatever reason.

INTERVIEWER: One always wonders -- you hear speculations about how much they possibly influenced each other, or had this nice conversation about art, and a direction it's taking.

FORD: Don't you think so? Yes.

INTERVIEWER: It would have been wonderful to be a fly on that wall.

FORD: But I don't remember observing anything like that myself. I observed it in their work. I loved their work. When I was really young, I really loved both their work.

INTERVIEWER: When you say "really young" -- eighteen, or -- ?

FORD: No, younger. Right away. I loved Bob's work. Jasper -- I guess I was older when I first started to look at his work. Yes, but eighteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.

INTERVIEWER: Bob was doing "Combines."

FORD: Yes. Oh, yes. Absolutely.

You see, the thing is that because I never missed a Cunningham performance, I saw the first, red.... --

INTERVIEWER: *Minutiae*.

FORD: Yes. I saw that performed, when it was first performed. Then that piece was exhibited at the Charles Egan Gallery, and I remember going to the opening. I remember going to Bob's opening at the Egan Gallery and seeing it there, and seeing all their standing -- they weren't quite "Combines" yet. They were, actually, but they were more screens --

INTERVIEWER: *Yoicks*, and all of those. I think your father introduced Charles Egan to Bob.

FORD: I'm sure he did. I'm sure he did. I'm sure he did.

INTERVIEWER: What was the response in the crowd -- do you remember? -- to seeing that work?

FORD: I think it was very controversial. I think that my father -- his peers were appalled. They thought it was the end -- they felt personally attacked by Jasper's work. My father wasn't made like that. He was too curious, and his ego was such that -- not that he didn't have an ego, but his ego was such that it just wasn't challenging to him. It didn't seem like a personal challenge to him or his work. He could care less about that. He was just lit up. Well, if you were half alive, you couldn't fail to be -- because they were so lit up, and their work was so lit up.

So I knew that right away. Of course, I didn't have to battle with my father about it. But I do remember, at the opening, and then other times, that -- It seems hard to imagine this nowadays, but it seemed very, very radical. I think it's amazing that Charles Egan also was open to that. But the thing is, he'd already shown Joseph Cornell. He was an amazing person, actually, Egan. I don't think anybody's ever written anything about him, like a biography. He was amazing.

INTERVIEWER: About what made him tick?

FORD: Yes. He was like this Irish kind of drunk. My father thought of him as a character out of Joyce. My father loved Joyce, and I think he "got" Charles Egan. He got him. They got each other, totally. But I wish I knew more about him. I don't really know very much about him. I'd love to know more about him. Someone should write a biography.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Because we don't know enough.

FORD: And also, it's interesting, I think, for young people to be reminded, over and over and over again, what the art world was like in those days. He would close the gallery down at lunch time. He used to drink at Schrafft's (if you can believe this). There is no Schrafft's anymore in New York, but it used to be like a big tea room, but they also had a bar. So there would be ladies in their white gloves, having lunch, and then there would, like, Charles Egan, at the bar, getting drunk at two o'clock in the afternoon. [Laughter] And forgetting to go back and open the gallery up.

INTERVIEWER: They did have that. What your father helped put together was -- was it the Eighth Street Club or something?

FORD: Oh, yes. That was a whole other thing.

INTERVIEWER: That sounded like sort of a wild time. It sounded like there was a lot of drinking going on.

FORD: Oh, yes. Oh, god, yes. I mean, that's actually something that separated my father in some ways. There were two things that separated him from all of this. One was that he was not a big drinker; and also that he had children. He was very much a patriarch. He wasn't the kind of father who felt he didn't have to show up at dinnertime, or whatever. He was very -- and there weren't too many of those around. So his social life was not quite in the same league. Although they liked to go to the Cedar Bar. That was a treat. My father and mother used to go. I used to have their telephone number. Because we started babysitting for ourselves, my sister and I. I think we were too young, actually. But we would be left alone in the evening, and we would have that telephone number. I remember once calling my mother up for some reason, calling her up at the Cedar Bar [Laughs].

But they weren't heavy drinkers, either one of them. It's not that they were getting loaded down there. They were just meeting their friends.

INTERVIEWER: That's so funny. Did you say you babysat for Christopher?

FORD: I did. And that came about because -- and this is how I know Sue, because I never saw them as a couple.

INTERVIEWER: Bob and Sue.

FORD: Bob and Sue. I would be very surprised if my father did. That was so brief. The end of it was so quick. But the way that happened is that somebody arranged for me to get a scholarship to the Dalton School --

INTERVIEWER: Where she went.

FORD: -- where Sue had gone. And when I arrived there, she was the assistant to Aaron Kurzon, who had been her painting teacher. They're still friends. He eventually moved up near her, up in -- is it Stony Point? Where's the Bucky Fuller house that Sue's parents had, up there? I wonder if she still has it.

INTERVIEWER: I know what you're talking about, but I don't know where it is.

FORD: Stony Creek. Stony Creek. You go up the Connecticut turnpike and you pass it. It's right there.

Well, anyway, she was working as Aaron's assistant. I used to make a lot of paintings when I was in high school, so I got to know Sue, and I guess she knew my father. I don't know exactly what happened. But anyway -- oh -- through Dorothea she would have known my father, because they were girlfriends. They were friends. Dorothea and Sue were early close friends.

Dorothea's marriage had broken up immediately, so they were two single mothers with babies, and those babies spent a lot of time together, and the mothers spent a lot of time together. So I'm pretty sure that's how Sue and my father would have gotten to know each other.

Anyway, Sue lived in an apartment up near Dalton, up east. I don't know if it was East 89<sup>th</sup> Street -- somewhere over there -- and I used to go over there, I think every Friday. Oh, yes. Because we got out of school early on Fridays, and I used to go over and babysit for her. I needed to babysit. We were so poor, all those years. I started babysitting as early as I could, and I had a steady babysitting job for Christopher for, I don't know, a couple of years.

It's funny, because I haven't stayed in touch with them. I haven't seen them in many years, and we didn't communicate with each other at all. He probably doesn't really remember any of that.

INTERVIEWER: He's a fine man. [Laughs]

FORD: I'm so glad.

INTERVIEWER: I'm interested in the Merce/Bob/you triangle. Was Bob present at the Cunningham studio when you were taking dance classes?

FORD: No.

INTERVIEWER: Because I know that he did design a significant number of works.

FORD: Oh, yes, he did. He was never there during classes.

So anyway, that's how I knew Sue. And it's funny because many years later, I went back to Dalton and was Aaron's assistant. I did exactly what Sue did. It's so funny, about that. I also had a young baby at the time, and lived up there anyway. It's funny.

So what happened is that -- so we were at Black Mountain the summer I was thirteen, and then I think I had one more year -- eighth grade -- and then the next year I went to Dalton. And somehow, right around then, we went to see Merce dance at the Cherry Lane. I went many times. At that time, Merce was teaching classes on Sheridan Square. I don't know whose idea it was -- if I asked if I could study with him, or if my father said, "Would you like to study with Merce?" I said, "Oh, yes, I'd love to do that." So he actually traded a little painting with Merce for my -- It just came up the other day. We kind of lost track of it. Nobody knew exactly where it was. And Jason Andrew, the guy who works for me back here, he located it. He found it.

But anyway -- I would go down there. It was a beautiful but very modest space on the second floor of a two-story building, and John would play the piano most times, and Merce gave his classes. Occasionally, Carolyn would teach. Maybe there were six or seven of us there. Vera Williams was in one of those classes. I remember her. I also used to see Viola there. I can't remember. I think later she began to teach some classes; or maybe she would just dance with us. It was just great. It was just great. I just loved it.

INTERVIEWER: It's really interesting that there was this tight little group of people who had formed in the mountains of North Carolina, and that just stuck together in New York -- professionally and socially -- and it appears that the only thing that stops them is death. Otherwise, they're pretty much --

FORD: Well. Yes. Did I mention Remy Charlip?

INTERVIEWER: I think you mentioned him, yes.

FORD: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Who had done costumes and then Bob did costumes.

FORD: When I left the city to go away to college, as I became fully adult, I kind of went off on my own, in a funny way. I did and I didn't. I married a painter who was showing at the Castelli gallery, so I didn't go too far away. But I used to go visit Jasper; I somehow didn't preserve my friendship with Bob. Of course, his life became very, very big and so on, but I think if I had made some effort; if I hadn't been shy about it, I think I could have -- and I had a very sad (for me) experience. I used to .... Whenever I saw him anywhere, we'd give each other a big bear hug, but that wasn't very often. Because I didn't really hang out, and Bob [husband] and I didn't really hang out in the art world, after a certain point. We did when we were young; then we kind of stopped doing that. We did stay friends with Lois Long. Do you know who she is?

INTERVIEWER: No.

FORD: Well, she was very, very close to John Cage, and Jasper, and Bob. I think her friendship with Jasper remained intact until the very, very end. I think she sort of went in and out with John, but they were very close. She and John were great mushroom -- she was a very active mushroom person. She was a marvelous marvelous person, and we used to see Jasper through Lois. That was the last way we would regularly see him, at the parties at her house.

I'm still friends with Susan Lawrence. Do you know who she is?

INTERVIEWER: No.

FORD: She is still very, very close to Jasper, and I just saw her in Rome, actually. But Jasper and I pass messages to each other.

But I was walking up the street, Lafayette Street, with my husband, Bob, not too many years ago, and I saw Bob Rauschenberg's Cadillac SUV out in front of this building, and they were loading wheelchairs and all this huge amount of equipment into the back. I said to Bob, "Look, that's Bob's car." I'd seen it before. As we were walking by, I saw Bob sitting in the front seat, in the passenger seat, and I waved at him. And he waved back at me, and I knew he didn't know who I was. I went up to him, and he tried to lower the window and he couldn't do it, and the other people were preoccupied. I said, "It's Hermine," and he had this beatific smile on his face. But he didn't know who I was. It was so typical of him, actually -- that he was so

loving, and so ready to greet whoever was greeting him, and he didn't really know who it was. I think that was the last time I saw him.

INTERVIEWER: *You* think he didn't know who you were.

FORD: Maybe he did.

INTERVIEWER: I'll bet he did.

FORD: He tried very hard -- I don't even know if he could hear me. I was saying my name because didn't think he would recognize me. It had been a long time. I'm an old lady now. Susan Lawrence told me a funny story just now, in Rome. She said, "When I told Jasper I was going to Rome, he said, 'What are you going there for?'" Typical Jasper. And she said, "Well --," she gave her reasons, and she said, "Plus, I'm going to see Bob and Hermine there." And he said, "Oh, that's a good enough reason to go to Rome. What are they doing there? How old is Hermine now?" And Susan said, "Oh, she's probably around my age." And he said, "Oh, no, Susan, she couldn't possibly be as old as you are." [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: There's just as much difference between your age and her age now, as there was in 1959.

FORD: Well, Susan and I are sort of the same age. She's probably a little younger than I am, if anything.

INTERVIEWER: That's very funny.

FORD: I know when I turned forty, Jennifer Bartlett gave a very big, lush birthday party for me, and Jasper came. He told Jennifer, when she called him up to invite him, he said, "It's impossible. Hermine can't possibly be forty." I told that to Susan. I said, "Try seventy-one out on him." [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: When you were in college, were you studying? That was the early '60s, right?

FORD: Well, late '50s -- very late '50s, early '60s.

INTERVIEWER: So one would not be studying Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Or would they be taught?

FORD: Well, first of all, when I went to college, I went to Antioch, and they hardly had an art department. I knew that. I had no intention of studying art. At that time, I really had no intention of being an artist. I mean, I never did not make art, but it took me a long time to see myself as an artist, a professional artist, in the world, for obvious reasons. So I wanted to get away from New York, I wanted to get away from the art world, I wanted to go to a different part of the country, and it was great. I had a wonderful time there. I did finally have to choose a major and so on. There was a tiny little art department there, and actually the man who ran it was a very nice young guy from the Midwest. He knew who my father was, he knew all this,

and it was excruciating for me, because I liked him a lot. He was a very sweet man. He would come around and see me and he'd say, "So, do you know Franz Kline?" That was the extent of my art education. It was horrible. I couldn't wait to -- Then I did go to Yale for a year, as an undergraduate, and it was ridiculous. I didn't want to stay. I could have stayed. They offered me a scholarship to stay. But no. Art school was not for me, because of all this other stuff. Alex Katz came up to teach painting. That was as far out as they got. Otherwise, it was .... Albers was no longer at Yale, but all his sycophants were still teaching. And that's funny, because Bob, himself, was up against that at Black Mountain.

Then, in the earliest years after I got out of school, I used to go downtown -- we lived on 95<sup>th</sup> Street -- I used to go downtown to draw from a model -- this woman, she was really nice. And she was a very good painter, actually Her name was Lois Dodd. I don't know how I found my way here. There were a group of artists, and one of them -- I don't know if I really want this to be public, this little story, but --

INTERVIEWER: All right. I'm going to give you a chance to cut it out.

FORD: Right. Because I like [name withheld at interviewees request] as a person, a lot. He used to drive me uptown, because we were the only two people who lived uptown. He used to drive me uptown. I remember stopping at a red light on Fifth Avenue, in front of the Jewish Museum, which had -- was it a Jasper retrospective, or a Rauschenberg retrospective, really early on?

INTERVIEWER: Rauschenberg -- '61, Alan Solomon.<sup>2</sup>

FORD: That's right. Alan Solomon. We were stopped at a red light, the museum was here, I was in the passenger seat here, and [name withheld at interviewees] was the driver. He leaned across me, he rolled the window down, and he *spit* out the window. I never forgot that. I was just -- I don't know if I ever went back to that drawing group. I thought, "I think I'm in the wrong place down there."

INTERVIEWER: So when you became -- when you saw yourself as an artist -- did you -- obviously, your father must have been a huge influence on you.

FORD: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But for your generation, did the work that -- and not just Bob, but -- specially Bob...

FORD: Oh, yes, totally. And my husband. My husband. Yes. Absolutely. I don't think that I was directly influenced, in my own work. My own work was many, many years in the developing. So I would say that it was through my husband that I kind of aligned myself with that, as an adult. In my own work, I kind of bypassed a lot of -- not only their work, but early conceptual art, and minimalism -- I bypassed a lot of stuff before I got serious about my own

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<sup>2</sup> Correction. The Rauschenberg Retrospective at the Jewish Museum took place in 1963, not in 1961. (KT)

work. But my sympathies were totally there, and my interest, and my respect. I don't know at what point art schools -- I have no idea -- I don't really like art schools that much, even though I've taught for many, many years. I don't know what they do.

INTERVIEWER: How is it that you knew about the Joseph Albers/Bob Rauschenberg tension?

FORD: This is a story that I've told so many times that I don't even remember how I know this. I think that Bob told me this; or, maybe he didn't tell *me*, but he told a room full of people that I was then in. Because at my parents house there was a social -- it's really interesting. People socialized very differently in those days than they do now. It's kind of old-fashioned, actually, as I look back. You'd have people in for drinks, and you'd sit around in a circle and they'd be talking. So civilized. Or around the dinner table. Well, that we still do.

Anyway, I think I heard Bob tell the story of how, when he was a student at Black Mountain, Albers would give an assignment every week, and then the students would have to put their work up on the wall, at the start of the class. Then he'd start at one end, and he'd go down. I don't know what he would do. He'd make comments, and -- every week he'd get to Bob's work, and he'd say, "Whoever made that, would you please take it off the wall?" And -- This is the part of the story that I really like the most -- that Bob was really upset about this, and he really wanted to figure out how to please Albers, and he figured it out. He said, "Now I know what he wants. He wants me to make a Cézanne." I think Albers was really nuts. But, anyway -- So he brought this Cézanne-esque, probably more conceptually in terms of the color -- because that's -- when I was at Yale I took Albers' color course (not with him, but with one of his students, so I know a little bit of something about how Albers taught his color theory) -- and the story goes that Bob comes in, he puts that work up, and Albers comes in, he goes down the line, and he stops in front of Bob's and he says, "Everybody but this person, take their work down." [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: That's a great story. I've not heard that story.

Was he the life of the party at your parents' house?

FORD: Oh, yes. Absolutely. He was a wonderful dancer, too. You know that. I do remember dancing parties, with all of us together. But I didn't do too much of that, because I didn't really -- I mean, I would be at the dinner table and see him, but I didn't go out to night parties with my parents, when I was growing up. No.

INTERVIEWER: Did they dance at your house?

FORD: Occasionally, they did. This doesn't have anything to do with him, but one time there was a Greek artist named Kaldis and I came home from Dalton one day, with my best girlfriend, who came from a very stuffy family. She was the only person who lived downtown, but she lived on Gramercy Park (which we didn't, needless to say). [Laughs] Anyway, we came home together, and here was this Kaldis in the living room with my parents, and they were dancing to Greek music, at 3:30 in the afternoon. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: That's so funny.



FORD: In Provincetown, later in the summer, my parents had dancing parties.

INTERVIEWER: I was just thinking, okay, 1958, early '60s -- it's not really swing music. Was it Motown?

FORD: Well, Bob and I danced to Motown. Absolutely. That was totally what was happening.

INTERVIEWER: Your husband, Bob.

FORD: My husband, Bob. We used to go out and dance. We used to go to parties and dance. We used to go to the Peppermint Lounge -- Chubby Checkers and the Peppermint Lounge. We used to go there and dance. We danced a lot in the '60s. Yes. Aretha Franklin, Dionne Warwick. Absolutely.

But my parents -- and I'm sure that Bob did also -- Rauschenberg, dance to rock 'n roll, in the '60s. But my parents, right before that, maybe early on -- they liked jazz. My parents liked jazz. I remember in Provincetown -- yes -- young people, right before rock 'n roll they would dance to jazz.

INTERVIEWER: Any other Bob stories from around the circle? That's a great one. I have to make sure that you've poured them all out. That was wonderful.

FORD: No, I don't think I can top that. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: It is a really nice story.

So, looking down the road, for these people thirty years from now, who don't know Bob Rauschenberg as a person, what is it you think about, when you think about him, that they should make sure to know?

FORD: I think it's all in his work. I think you can see .... I don't think that's always true of artists, but I think in this case it's true. You see this enormous generosity of spirit that he had as a person, and that he expressed in his work. And the sense that we're born to enjoy ourselves, and making the work is wonderful, and looking at it is wonderful, and being around it. It's not that there wasn't a dark side. My father called it hi-jinks. He loved their hi-jinks. That's how he would refer to it, in a way. He could talk about it more seriously, I'm sure. But he was very, very amused, and totally entertained and engaged.

INTERVIEWER: About the personality or the work?

FORD: Both. Both.

INTERVIEWER: For Bob and Jasper, or simply for Bob?

FORD: It's true, what you're hinting at -- that, certainly, Jasper did not have that in his personality as overtly as Bob did. But he had this kind of irony, and humor that turned in on

itself. He had an -- Jasper I'm talking about now -- extremely fresh take on whatever it is. So even though their styles were so completely different from each other, there was still a commonality. I think, even in Jasper's *work*, there is certainly a more sober, more somber quality to it.

But, see, I don't think Bob's work is any less serious than Jasper's. Those are really serious, human traits I've just described. So I don't mean that one is lighter, or of less consequence or import than the other. But you're right: I'm not sure that my father would refer to Jasper or his work as hi-jinks -- although I think he wouldn't mind sort of lumping it, generally, all together. And other things, too, in the '60s. Even Merce's dancing had that quality, especially early on, especially in those early days.

What else, I mean ... One thing -- I don't remember my father arguing that much with anybody about Jasper and Bob, his closeness to their work. I think they came into the art world so quickly -- of course, he was certainly not the only person around who was interested. It wasn't that.... But among his older friends, I don't remember him ever -- for instance, with Franz Kline (not that I was privy), or even like a close painter friend, and a different kind of painter, Giorgio Cavallon -- I don't remember any conversation or any strife in their conversation about Bob and Jasper. I think everybody loved Bob, no matter what they thought of his work -- whatever envy they had of his career, or whatever. I think he was kind of irresistible as a person, so I don't remember there being any conflict, really. Maybe there was, somewhere. I could be wrong. But I didn't witness it.

INTERVIEWER: Did your father become concerned in the dark-side department, with Bob's drinking? Or was that earlier?

FORD: I don't think he witnessed it, really, too much. I did. I'm very squeamish. I have kind of a phobia about alcoholism. I don't know where I got it, because I didn't have any close in my family. But I don't like to be around a lot of big drinkers, and that may have been one of the things that kept me away a little bit.

No, I don't think -- he certainly wouldn't have been judgmental about it. If anything, he would just have been saddened.

INTERVIEWER: It's amazing that Bob was able to do so much important work, with sometimes one hand tied behind his back. It's quite extraordinary.

FORD: Well, he had a fantastic force, life force. Just fantastic.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to say?

FORD: I'll probably wake up in the middle of the night thinking, "Oh, my god." I think the main story, I've told you.

INTERVIEWER: No, it's great.

[End of Interview]